

 TOKYOPOP

THE ADVENTURES OF DUINN SURK

MISATO FUKAZAWA

WITCHES' FOREST



デュアン・サーク

D U A N S U R K 1

魔女の森〈上〉

深沢美潮

Mishio Fukazawa

電撃文庫

デュアンサーク

D U A N S U R K 2

魔女の森〈下〉

深沢美潮
Mishio Fukazawa

電撃文庫

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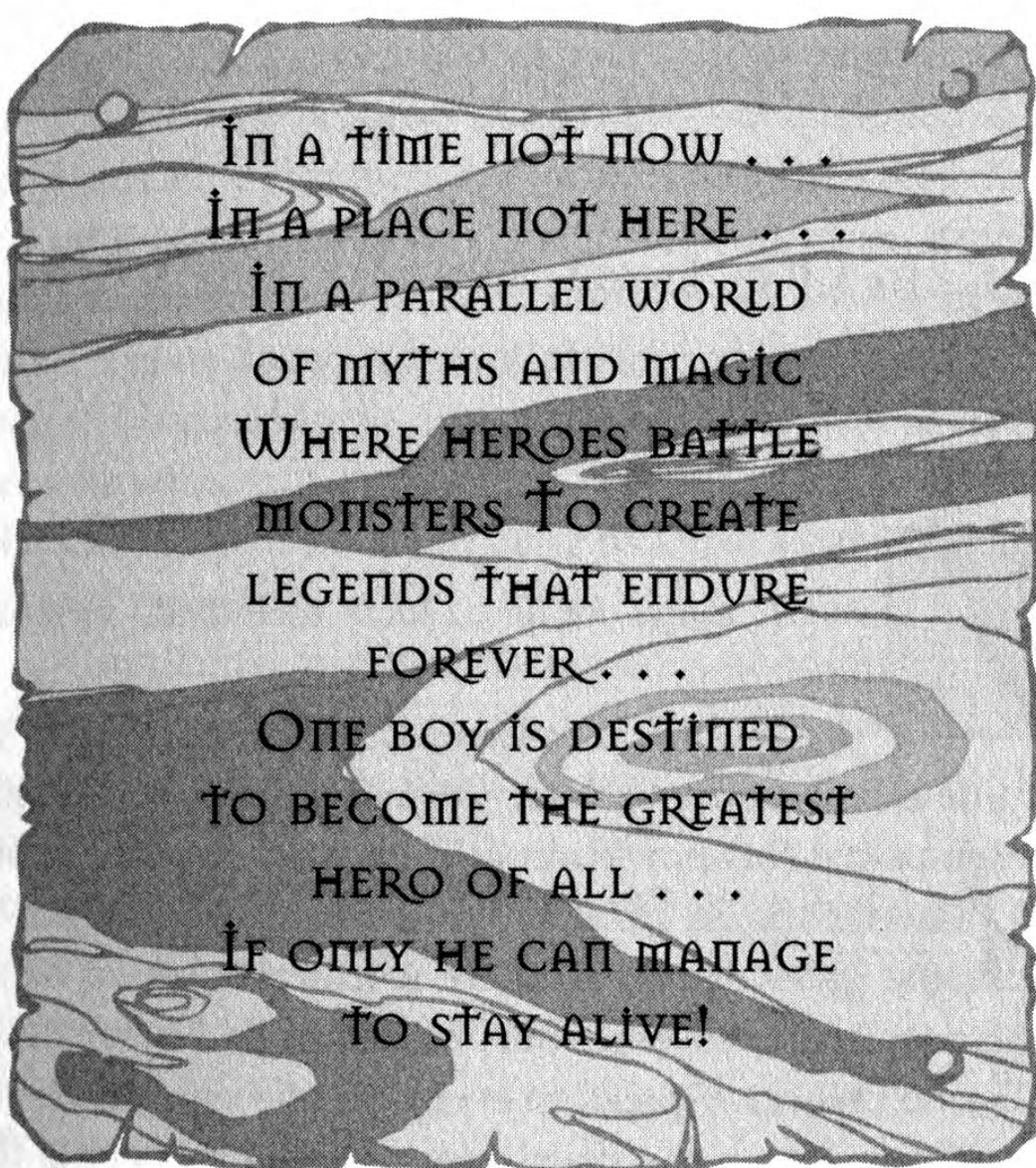
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IN A TIME NOT NOW . . .

IN A PLACE NOT HERE . . .

IN A PARALLEL WORLD
OF MYTHS AND MAGIC
WHERE HEROES BATTLE
MONSTERS TO CREATE
LEGENDS THAT ENDURE
FOREVER . . .

ONE BOY IS DESTINED
TO BECOME THE GREATEST
HERO OF ALL . . .

IF ONLY HE CAN MANAGE
TO STAY ALIVE!

CHAPTER I:

WHY BEING LOST IN THE FOREST SUCKS



With all things in life, Duan reflected, there are limits.

At the moment, Duan experienced an entirely new and unusual limit: the outer limit of hunger. He contemplated this new limit as if he were floating above himself. The feeling in his gut, he observed, had begun as a bothersome gnawing. From there it had progressed to an alarming pang. After several hours of that, it had subsided to the dull ache that now spread to every muscle in his body.

Trudging across the dried pine needles carpeting the forest floor, he could barely put one foot in front of the other. The warm September sun dappled his face and dyed his hair a golden wheat color. It turned the forest into an enchanted emerald palace. But despite the beauty of his surroundings, he could only think of one thing: potatoes. Warm, steaming, boiled potatoes, covered in butter and salt. If he could have one wish right now, it would be to be buried under a mound

of boiled potatoes. Just imagining the smell was enough to make his empty stomach growl.

“Giis, heal, gi?” squawked Check. The baby *grinia*—a winged lizard—perched on Duan’s shoulder, cocking his head to one side. Duan knew what Check really had asked: should he perform the Heal magic spell?

Since their paths had crossed a few months ago, Duan and Check had become inseparable companions. The baby *grinia* was about six inches tall and had an emerald green, gold-flecked body and delicate, insectlike wings that stayed folded under a carapace on his back until he needed them. Then he would spread them wide, and the transparent wings, twice the span of his small body, would flash in the air and launch him like a hummingbird into flight. He also liked to curl his long tail around Duan’s neck or cling to Duan’s hair with his three-fingered forepaws.

Check had big eyes that were uncommonly expressive and a shock of fluffy golden hair that delighted Duan when it caught the light. It was slightly metallic, as lizard hair was prone to be, and this made it difficult to cut. Duan had to use a pair of heavy garden shears to keep it trimmed, the same scissors he used to clip the *grinia*’s toenails. Check enjoyed being groomed, preening himself afterward, and when Duan scratched his back under his wings, the *grinia* would let out a soft purring sound.

Check was able to cast some low-level healing spells, and he could mimic the words of human beings, although he knew only a handful as yet. Inquisitive by nature, he had a habit of examining everything that crossed his path. Literally, *everything*. A bit of string, a fallen leaf, whatever—the baby *grinia* just wouldn’t be satisfied until he had poked it, prodded it, picked it up, scrutinized it, stuck it in his mouth, or otherwise

investigated its every aspect. That was why Duan had named him *Check*.

Right now, Check checked out Duan. Sensitive to the change in his master's mood, he nuzzled inquiringly against Duan's cheek. His black eyes blinked into Duan's.

"Heal, gii-iss?" Check repeated the question, this time with a slight flutter of his transparent wings.

Duan waved him away in irritation.

"Forget it," he growled. "I'm not sick or wounded, just starving. Besides, you already cast a Heal spell on me, and casting another won't help. It would leave you as exhausted as I am."

Check flew away and found a tree to perch in. The grinia continued to watch Duan's progress with big, hurt, helpless eyes.

"Look, I'm sorry, Check," Duan said, regretting his gruff tone, "but right now I can't really deal with you being all cute and concerned, okay? We have to conserve our resources. I'm trying to stay focused; I'm in a crappy mood; I haven't eaten in days; and everything . . ."

Duan ran his fingers through his light brown hair, pushing it back from his brow, and paused. He sighed deeply, as he had done countless times before. "Everything has limits," he said irritably and slumped at the foot of the tree.

"Gi!" Check squeaked from a branch overhead. He folded up his wings and fell silent, trying to make himself as small and unobtrusive as possible.

They were both tired.

Duan sighed again. Now that he was sitting down, he was afraid he might not have the strength to get up again. He couldn't remember the last time he had eaten a proper meal. The setting sun slanted into his eyes; he blinked worriedly.

Dammit, he thought, I should really do something about this soon. The sun is going down—that means another night of monsters.

Unfortunately, the need to find food and shelter for the night, which made perfect sense to his rational brain, didn't do anything to motivate the rest of him. His body functioned, but barely, and only thanks to the Heal spell that Check had cast on him a few hours ago. That spell was fading fast, leaving him more drained than ever. *If everything has limits, Duan realized with a sudden sickly feeling, then I might just have reached mine.*

This was no good.

The sun continued to set.

His stomach growled.

Duan assessed his situation. Here he was, Duan Surk, a little over two months shy of seventeen and only a Level 2, despite the fact that he'd been a card-carrying adventurer for almost a whole year. At five foot seven and one hundred and twenty-six pounds, he could charitably be described as slim, but he was more like skin and bones—all sharp angles and gangly limbs, hardly the strapping frame of a born adventurer.

His light brown hair had grown raggedly over his ears—he was in need of a haircut. He had green eyes, although they sometimes appeared gray in a certain light. Not that anyone else had ever observed that interesting fact. Certainly no girl. Duan told himself and others that he didn't have time for a girlfriend, but the truth was more the opposite, or so it seemed to him. For some mysterious reason, girls had never flocked to his side.

His occupation, as listed on his Adventurer's Card, was Fighter. But he hadn't actually done any real *fighting* yet—a fact that was painfully obvious from his low level.

He often reminded himself that leveling up could be a slow business, which was true . . . after you hit Level 6. But, hello, he hadn't even made it to Level 3 yet!

Still a measly Level 2 after a whole year of adventuring, Duan brooded dismally. *That's what I call inefficient!* Actually, he could think of worse things to call it.

He took inventory of his assets. Worn-out brown clothes with patches on the knees: check. Boots with big holes: check. Stupid short sword he'd been tricked into buying by a dwarf: check. No matter how diligently he sharpened that sword, it just wouldn't hold an edge. It was barely sharp enough to cut an onion, let alone an enemy.

As for family, Duan couldn't remember his parents at all. Whether they had died, or whether they'd abandoned him and his brother, nobody in town could say . . . or, at any rate, nobody *would* say. Eventually he'd just stopped asking.

His brother, Gaeley Surk, was three years older than Duan. Gaeley was tough-minded, strapping, brave, and, even as a kid, could hold his own in a fight. In short, he was the opposite of Duan in just about every respect.

The brothers had grown up in an area where, if they took a turn down the wrong street or strayed just a little too far off the path near the edge of the forest, they could end up knee-deep in a swarm of monsters. It was a tough life for any child. But then again, there were plenty of kids who lived in similar or even worse circumstances, so it was hardly worth complaining about.

Gaeley never complained. That was for sure. Duan had been a weak and sickly child, and the medicines it took to bring him back to health were expensive. Between those costs and the more routine expenses of food and shelter, life was not easy for the two brothers. But Gaeley had always provided for them. He would do any kind of work: chopping wood, transporting stone, carpentry,

assisting at the weapons shops. The kind of manual labor most kids wouldn't want to do, Gaeley welcomed. Of course, the harder the labor, the better it paid—Gaeley was strong and undaunted by hauling stones across the yard.

Gaeley worked for both of them, keeping a roof over their heads and nourishing food on their plates. Duan remembered it well—being alone in bed all day, reading books about famous adventurers, and then Gaeley would return from work, covered in stone or wood dust, and drop an armload of food and medicine on the table. He'd give Duan a big smile and ruffle his hair with rough, calloused hands. They didn't talk much, but it was understood: everything was okay.

Everything worth knowing, Duan reflected, I learned from Gaeley.

It was Gaeley who had taught him about limitations. He remembered that day well. It was one of the rare times that Duan was healthy enough to go outside. Duan had been nine at the time. Gaeley, at twelve, was already tall and broad-shouldered, and for every one of his long, easy strides, the scrawny Duan was forced to take two in order to keep up. They had been walking along the edge of town, on the way to the market, to line up for rations. *It was sunset then, Duan thought, about the same hour it is now.*

Gaeley had stopped and stared off into the forest. "Duan," he began in a tone that Duan knew very well. It meant a corny speech was at hand.

Not that Gaeley would have used the word *corny* to describe his speeches. He thought of them as "philosophical expositions." But just because his speeches could be a little corny sometimes didn't mean they weren't important. Not as far as Duan was concerned.

"Yes, Gaeley?" said Duan.

“You’re well enough now, so you’ll probably want to play outside a lot more. It’s time for you to understand something about the big, wide world. You’re a clever boy—which is all to your credit, really—but sometimes clever people get themselves into trouble they can’t get out of; often, in fact, simply because they *are* clever. Do you understand what I’m trying to say?”

Duan nodded, holding his breath, but he didn’t understand at all.

“There are times, Duan, when cleverness is no substitute for wisdom,” Gaeley went on. “Wisdom comes from experience. And experience, much to our misfortune, comes at the expense of making mistakes. Some mistakes are fatal and not worth making. But we must make these mistakes anyway. Well, not *those* mistakes. Not the fatal ones. Because then we’d be dead, wouldn’t we? I mean . . .”

Gaeley sighed and scowled at the dark edge of forest for a moment, composing his thoughts. At last, with an air of gravity, he resumed. “Duan . . . in all things in life, there are limits.”

Duan nodded seriously, though he still had no idea where all this was going.

Gaeley indicated the distant line of trees. “You see this forest?”

“Yes,” Duan said eagerly.

“You have heard stories about it?”

“I’ve heard that the children who step into it . . . don’t come back.”

“Good.” Gaeley turned to Duan and put his hands on Duan’s shoulders, looking into his eyes.

While it made Duan uncomfortable to be stared at so intently, he wanted desperately to understand what his brother was talking about. It felt important.

"Duan," said Gaeley. His eyes seemed to smolder with the concentrated wisdom he was about to impart.

"Yes, Gaeley?"

"Don't go into the forest."

Then Gaeley patted him on the shoulder and walked on.

Duan, confused, looked to the edge of the forest and back again at his brother. He hurried to catch up. "That's *it*?"

"Well, yes."

" 'Don't go into the forest.' "

"Exactly." Gaeley smiled, pleased that Duan had understood so completely.

"Ever?"

"Ever."

"Well, that's just 'cause I'm a kid, right? Kids shouldn't go into the forest. But when we're men, when we're older, then we can go on adventures, right? We can go into the forest then."

Gaeley laughed. "When we're men . . ." He eyed Duan fondly. "Well, yes, we can do whatever we want then."

"Good," Duan concluded, satisfied. "When we're men, Gaeley, we can become warriors, and then we can go on lots of adventures together. That will be awesome!"

Gaeley ruffled Duan's hair playfully and then strode away.



Years passed and Gaeley grew stronger almost by the second. By the time he was seventeen, he had a body of steel that would have shamed most men of twice or even three times his age. Duan was fourteen and in good health, though he remained scrawny.

One night the two brothers sat at home, in front of the fire. Gaeley worked as a blacksmith's assistant and was able to bring firewood home. Duan watched as his brother reached into the fire to turn the logs, barely minding the heat.

Gaeley was in a pensive mood. Finally, he turned to Duan and spoke. "Duan, I am thinking of going to fight."

Their country, Froll, had been at war with the neighboring country, Ponzo, for almost the length of Duan's life. For as long as he could remember, there had been news of battles, victories, defeats, shortages, and bitter winters full of patriotic speeches and scarce rations. Now entering its eleventh year, the war continued with no end in sight. Gaeley, with his strong sense of justice and even stronger sense of duty, had often talked about joining the army and serving his country, but no one had taken him seriously until then.

Duan raised his troubled face to look up at Gaeley. He was surprised to see pain in his brother's eyes. The war was a fact of life; it wasn't ending any time soon, either. It hurt Gaeley to hear this call of duty but not be able to answer it. Still, he had a duty to his brother, too. Normally, when Gaeley wanted to do something, he simply did it and kept it to himself.

But, Duan realized, this was different. Looking into his brother's questioning eyes, Duan realized that Gaeley was actually asking his permission to forsake one duty for another. Duan thought that perhaps he had a duty too: a duty to Gaeley. So he did his best to hide his anxiety and instead gave his brother an encouraging smile.

Seeing his little brother's reaction, Gaeley went back into big-brother mode. He ruffled Duan's hair and smiled back reassuringly. "Actually, to be honest, I kinda wanna test how far my strength will get me in the outside world. Y'know, as a fighter. I reckon I won't be half bad. What do you think?"

“Gaeley, you’ll be a great fighter. I guarantee it!”

Gaeley’s smile grew wider. It was a different smile than usual, like a huge weight had lifted off his shoulders. He said quietly, “Hey, if my clever little brother guarantees it, it’s a sure thing.” As he murmured this, Gaeley clasped Duan’s shoulders with both hands.

“Duan . . .” He searched for the right words, but when he said them, all of the bravado dropped from his manner. He spoke sincerely and urgently: “Duan, you aren’t that strong; your build is slight. But don’t ever let that bother you. You have something the others don’t have. You are *smarter* than them. *That* is your weapon.”

Gaeley looked deeply into his eyes. “Have faith in yourself. And walk with your head held high.”

Usually when his brother made these corny speeches, Duan would have to fight to keep a straight face. But this time, it was different. The way Gaeley looked at him was just *different*. Was he crying? Duan had *never* seen his brother cry.

He suddenly felt as if his big brother were rushing away from him. As if he might never see him again. Duan couldn’t imagine life without Gaeley there to take care of him.

Tears filled his own eyes.

The two brothers embraced, each realizing that the distant future had arrived at last. The day had come for them to go their separate ways.

CHARACTER FILE

Duan Surk

Age: 17

Height: 5’ 7”

Weight: 126 lbs.

Hair: light brown

Eyes: green

Weapons: a battered short-sword

Defensive gear: short leather armor

Other: Adventurer for one year, but still at Level 2. Quick-thinking, kind, gentle, and older people find him endearing. Lacks stamina. Fully certified fighter.

Check

Species: Baby grinia

Height: 6”

Color: emerald green

Hair: golden

Eyes: black

Other: Use of low-level defensive magic (Heal and Cure).



“Duan, giiiis, stomach hurt?”

Duan came back to reality. The sun was still setting. It hung low against the sky, bathing everything in a soft golden glow.

“Giis, Duan—stomach hurt?” Check looked at him questioningly.

“No, it’s not that, Check. I mean, it *does* hurt, but . . .” Duan tried to find the words but failed. He sighed, running a weary hand across his face.

Check regarded him worriedly with his round black eyes.

Hello, the sun is setting, Duan’s brain shouted at him. *The worst monsters come out at night!* But again, the urgency his brain sensed had no affect the rest of him. He was too hungry and too weak to care.

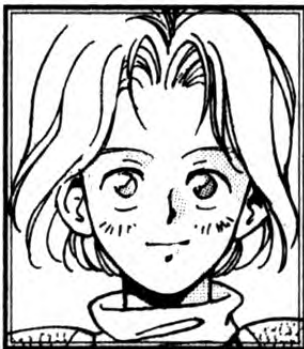
Duan began to believe that he would die here like a dog. Even if he looked at it objectively—in fact, especially if he looked at it objectively—he was screwed.

ADVENTURER LEVEL

2

Valid until:

16th November Sigress
Year 383

**Name:** Duan Surk**Date of Birth:**

16th November Sigress Year 366

Residence & Citizenship:

Kashibar 22-A, Froll

Contact Address: See above.**Occupation:** Fighter**Issue date:**

16th November Sigress Year 382

Skill Points:

Strength 28
Intelligence 62
Karma +4
Magic 10

EXPERIENCE POINTS:

221

(LEVEL-UP POSSIBLE AT 300)

Man, he thought. It would suck if I died here. He watched the sun play across the leaves. I have to see Gaeley one more time and show him that I've been doing fine as a fighter.

Doing fine? That was a laugh! Duan knew that he'd been doing anything *but* fine. He needed to have a proper adventure—he needed to do something, anything—to prove himself. How could he face his brother again, after all this time, knowing that he was only a Level 2? Would Gaeley be proud of him? Gaeley, the only person who'd ever believed in him at all?

Not likely.

No, Duan thought, it wouldn't be fair to die like this. It just wouldn't be fair! I haven't even had one proper adventure!

Duan stood up, startling Check, who flew above him in circles, and shouted into the trees: "THIS SUUUUCKS!"

CHAPTER 2:

SEE THE WORLD, PEEL POTATOES,
MAKE SOME FRIENDS?



Yes, as should be plain by now, Duan had decided to follow in his brother's footsteps, leave his hometown, and become an adventurer. Around the time he turned fifteen, shortly after Gaeley had left and joined the army, the principal towns and villages had established an Adventurers Club in response to the damage caused by marauding monsters.

Adventuring, especially when just starting out, was not only risky; it didn't pay very well. The profits were likely to be meager, barely enough for a room at a low-rent inn. The purpose of the Adventurers Club was to encourage local young people to volunteer by providing all sorts of incentives.

Here was how it worked: club members presented their cards at stores that participated in the Adventurers Club (excluding black-market stores, of course) and they would receive discounts on supplies, lodging, food, and even weapons. Stores and inns everywhere began sporting "Adventurers

Club Approved!” signs in the window. The young people of the towns and villages, bored and looking for any excuse to travel and fight monsters, signed up in droves. Duan was one of them—not that he cared anything about the discounts his Adventurer’s Card could bring him. It was enough for Duan just to be able to call himself an adventurer at last!

At first, anyone who applied for an Adventurer’s Card could get one. But pretty soon unscrupulous people started pretending to be adventurers in order to get discounts, and the townspeople complained. They wanted their villages protected, not a bunch of freeloaders taking advantage of the club card! So the rules were tightened a bit. Candidates, it was decided, would need to take an aptitude test to determine their suitability. Those accepted as adventurers would then face annual checkups to measure their progress. If they failed to kill a certain number of monsters, or to gain a certain number of skill points, their club card would be revoked.

Duan signed up right away. The test was in three parts. First, there was a physical test to determine fitness. Duan huffed his way through the minimum number of push-ups, and then fell flat on his face at one point on the obstacle course, which added a whole minute to his time.

Next came a practical skills test. He just managed to scrape by on that one. His fencing wasn’t great, but though he got low marks for parrying and lunging, he made up for it with his formidable skill at dodging.

Finally there was an IQ test. Duan aced that one, but he didn’t know if that would be enough to put him over the top as a fighter. On the day he went to get his results, he waited nervously as the Adventure Career Counselor rifled through the scores.

“Let’s see . . . Duan Surk . . . Duan Surk . . . Ah, here you are, young man.”

The counselor peered through Duan's papers, brow furrowed in concentration. He seemed to have forgotten that Duan sat there on pins and needles. The silence stretched unbearably.

"D-did I pass, sir?" Duan couldn't help asking.

The counselor looked up from the papers with a stern expression. "You got a C minus."

Duan nearly jumped for joy. C minus! Sure, it was the lowest grade for a suitability ranking, but he had passed. Passed!

"You did well in the IQ test, son," the counselor continued, his expression softening. "Extraordinarily well." The counselor leaned over his desk, raising a concerned eyebrow at Duan. "Are you sure you want to be a fighter, boy?" he continued. "I mean, a young man with your smarts . . . You would be a B grade or better if you wanted to be a cleric or a wizard . . . or even a chemist or a fortuneteller. Are you sure this is what you want to do?"

"Adventure is my life, sir!" Duan blurted out.

"Is it?" the counselor asked.

"Yes," Duan replied resolutely. "I mean, it did occur to me that I might not be suited for it. I was very sickly as a child, so I know I'm not very . . . anyway . . . the thing is . . ." He realized that he was babbling, but he couldn't help himself. It had been so long since he'd had someone to talk to about his dreams.

The counselor stared at him, waiting for him to finish.

Mustering every bit of his conviction, Duan concluded: "You just don't know until you give it a try, sir! I'm not giving up before I've given it my best shot."

"Yes, well," said the counselor, "determination counts for something, I suppose." He stamped Duan's application: APPROVED.

Duan burst out of the counselor's office, application in hand. He'd never been so happy in his life. At last he would be a fighter! Of course, the picture of his gallant brother was in the forefront of his mind. One day, he told himself, he and Gaeley would be fighting side by side, going on adventures together. He would make his big brother proud! This dream of the future buoyed him up as he ran across the courtyard to get his new Adventurer's Card.

But it wasn't long before he and his dream crashed into the harsh wall of reality.

Life as an adventurer, it turned out, was more difficult than Duan had imagined. Because of his low level, nobody wanted to team up with him, and consequently the best adventures, the ones with the most profit—and the most glory—were closed to him. As a result, he couldn't afford decent weapons or armor. The only way he could scrape together experience points was to hunt down small slimes in the fields and destroy them, beating them to death with a stick. For a real challenge, he would go up against *moufeys*. The fat caterpillars didn't do much besides cling to rocks, but they were technically monsters and, as he learned to his regret, packed a wicked sting if you got too close.

Duan tried not to be disheartened. If nothing else, the gutters of his town would be free of annoying slime-clogs. For months, he continued on this way, coming home covered with bug juice, dirt, and fresh moufey stings. Still, he was overjoyed when all his hard work paid off and he inched up to Level 2.

Soon he had run out of savings. The day he started to wonder if moufeys tasted any good roasted, he knew that he'd hit a new low point. He trudged home, discouraged.

Maybe the counselor had been right. Maybe he should find some other line of work. As he wondered about how he

was ever going to make a living, his eyes fell on a “Soldiers Wanted” sign.

Duan watched the flyer flutter against the post in the bright summer sun. It seemed to glittering with an unearthly promise extended only to him. No examination necessary? Adventurer’s Cardholders *especially* welcome? Fixed income? GOURMET FOOD? His heart began to race. An army position, with no experience necessary! His opportunity had arrived at last.

Maybe I’ll meet up with Gaeley!

He ran to the location of the 12th Battalion as fast as he could, trying to control the beating of his heart. Thankfully, only a handful of applicants waited outside the recruiter’s tent. Duan sized them up: a seedy-looking elf, a few dwarves who appeared slightly underage, and one kid who was taller than he but, Duan felt sure, couldn’t have leveled up beyond a three or four at most. Duan got in line behind the tall kid.

This was actually Duan’s second attempt to join the army. He’d applied months ago, right after he’d acquired the title of fighter. But the army had tougher requirements than the Adventurers Club, and Duan hadn’t been able to pass the physical exam. In fact, he hadn’t made it past the push-up trial.



The tall kid glanced back at him, and Duan sucked in his stomach and puffed out his chest, trying to look tough. No need for any of these losers to know about that embarrassing little episode. This was “no examination necessary.”

Before long, the commanding officer, Captain Rickson, appeared. He was a pleasant-looking man, slightly stout, with a coarse growth of beard. Duan liked him immediately.

Captain Rickson surveyed the new group of recruits with a twinkle in his eye. “So, you want to be soldiers, eh?” he bellowed good-naturedly.

The would-be recruits responded in the affirmative with shouts, nods, and raised fists.

“Good men!” shouted the captain. He gave Duan a comradely slap on the shoulder that almost sent him flying. “Think you’ve got what it takes, do you, son?”

“Y-yes, sir!” Duan stammered.

“Brave lad!” he boomed. “All of you, raise your right hands and prepare to be sworn in!”

Everyone raised his right hand, except for one of the dwarves, who put up his left. It took more time that Duan would have imagined possible to get this straightened out. But at last the oath was administered satisfactorily.

“Congratulations, men!” Captain Rickson said, giving them each a hearty handshake. “Welcome to the army! Now get over to the main tent and pick up your uniforms!”

Duan blinked. Was this a dream? He pinched his arm to wake himself up. *Ouch!* Nope, not dreaming: this was the real thing. He was dizzy with joy. Four square meals and a cot, plus the exciting life of a soldier! He was in the army now! With a good-natured captain and a stalwart group of comrades at his side, he would face every challenge, stare down death, and defend Froll. Gaeley would be so proud! It would be a hard

life, a challenging life, but a fulfilling one. *It's the army life for me!* Duan thought, striding over to the main tent with a spring in his step.

As many before Duan and many after him would come to understand, army life is indeed . . . challenging.

Once outfitted and assigned a bunk in the barracks, Duan reported back to the captain in his spiffy new uniform, boots spit-polished to a shine.

"Ah yes, Duan Surk." Captain Rickson glanced down at the clipboard in his hand, then back up at Duan. "You ready to serve your country, Surk?"

"Yes, sir!" said Duan, with a crisp salute.

"Good man. We've got a special detail for you."

"A special detail?"

The captain put an arm around Duan's shoulders and led him away from the other recruits. "Yep, that's right," he said with a wink. "It should suit your abilities, and who knows? You might even learn a thing or two."

Duan couldn't believe his luck. A special detail, for someone with his abilities! What could it be? Intelligence gathering? Strategy? After all, he had scored especially high on his IQ tests. They had probably gotten his test results from the Adventurers Club, and now he would be sent out on a special mission that only he, a person of great ability, could be depended upon to complete successfully. The thought of the experience points he would gain from such an adventure made him dizzy. Finally, he was going somewhere! He would do something important! His destiny was calling out to him!

Captain Rickson brought him to a large tent and patted him on the shoulder. "Here you go, Surk," he said, pulling back the tent flap. "Your special detail is—"

Duan smelled it before he saw it: a vast kitchen full of boiling steam, clattering dishes, and a packed-dirt floor covered with potato peelings.

“—mess duty! You report to Monty, the cook. Welcome to the army, Surk.” With that, the captain was gone.

Duan nearly slipped on the potato peelings in his haste to follow him. “Wait! WAIT! This isn’t what I—”

“Well, hello there!” said a gruff voice. “Are you the new busboy?”

Busboy?

Duan whirled around. The voice belonged to an immense man whose apron was covered with stains and whose lumpish head was slicked with thinning hair and sweat. The man towered like a giant potato over Duan, but his eyes were kind, and they regarded Duan with some amusement.

“I’m Monty, the cook. It’s about time you got here! The last busboy deserted, and the work has been piling up. The potatoes are over there, the onions over there. Oh, and there are the dishes from yesterday.”

Duan looked in the direction Monty pointed. A tower of dirty plates and pots leaned precariously out of the sink, threatening to fall over at any minute.

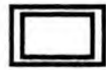
“We need them done by lunchtime, or the Froll army is going to be eating out of its shoes.” At this, Monty chuckled. “‘Eating out of its shoes.’ Heh. That would be something to see, all right. Heh heh.”

“There must be some mistake,” Duan said. “This isn’t what I—”

“And when you’re done over there,” Monty continued, paying no attention to him, “the floor could stand sweeping, and I sure could use a massage. I’ve been bending over the stove all morning and my back is killing me!”

Duan stared at the food-encrusted pans with a sinking heart. The smell of kitchen garbage wafted over him. Monty threw him an apron.

The army life for me, Duan thought ruefully as he put it on over his brand-new uniform.



Thus, Duan joined the army. And all in all, it wasn't *that* bad. Things could have been worse. For instance, he could have been stuck at the bottom of a monster trap with a bunch of long-eared cyclopes snarling over his head. And it wasn't as if the recruiting posters had *lied*, exactly. True enough, there was a fixed income. Duan got paid weekly. But after subtracting the cost of his rations, his uniform, his boots, and his kit—paid with interest, over time—what was left over was a “fixed” amount of chump change, barely enough to keep a dog alive.

As for experience points, well, no one was *prevented* from getting them. But camped for months on the outskirts of the forest waiting for orders wasn't exactly the best way to encounter monsters. Gourmet food? Well, Monty was a certified chef, with a framed diploma from the Froll School of Culinary Arts to prove it, but that didn't change the fact that every meal was porridge and potatoes. Anyone still hungry afterward was welcome to eat their fill of all the potato skins lying around. And as for new skills, why, just on his first day, Duan had learned quite a few: how to peel potatoes; how to chop onions without crying; how to scrape burned bits of porridge out of the bottom of a cast-iron cauldron . . .

Still, Monty was a warm-hearted soul, and as they worked together over the following weeks, the big cook took Duan under his wing and taught him all he could. Duan would give the cook neck rubs at the end of the day; in return, whenever

they had a spare moment, Monty would share some of his culinary experience, teaching his assistant how to skin fish and flop-eared rabbits, dice vegetables, prepare a stove and light a fire, and cook simple but nourishing meals. Over time, the two of them developed a deep affection and respect for each other.

No, army life wasn't so bad. Duan had a steady job and room and board. With perseverance and luck, if he worked hard, he might even become a cook himself one day. But it wasn't exactly adventuring, and that was the problem. Day after day after day after day, Duan held a kitchen knife instead of his sword. And though Monty was kind—as kind as a boss could be, really—in his heart, Duan was unhappy. Every day that he spent peeling potatoes was a day that he wasn't building experience points on adventures.

He would go back to his bunk at night, covered with bits of food, and look at his Adventurer's Card, wondering if it would get revoked. He hadn't a hope of leveling up at this rate. And worst of all, he hadn't met his brother. As it turned out, Gaeley wasn't even in the 12th Battalion! In fact, nobody could tell Duan anything about his brother's whereabouts at all.

Despite the risks involved, Duan was contemplating deserting like the busboy whose place he'd taken, when suddenly life took an unexpected turn.

The day had started like any other. He came in to work with the usual thought running through his head—*Should I leave today or tomorrow?*—and picked up the buckets to take to the brook and collect water.

“Come on, Check,” he called to the baby grinia. Check perked up, fluttering over to him and perching on his shoulder, nuzzling him while the empty buckets clanked at his side. Duan laughed.

“What do you think, Check? Should I run off today?”

“Giii-ah!” the grinia chirped, looking at him with bright, alert eyes.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. You’re happy anywhere, aren’t you?”

“Giii-is, happy, gi!” The grinia blinked at him proudly. Duan had been teaching the winged lizard a new word every day. Already Check possessed a wider vocabulary than some of Duan’s fellow soldiers . . . or so it sometimes seemed to him.

“Come on, Check. Let’s go get the water for washing up. Froll’s army awaits breakfast.”

Duan filled the buckets from the familiar brook while Check perched on a tree, enjoying the morning. It was just before sunrise and the air was fresh.

“The thing is, Check,” mused Duan, as much to himself as to the grinia, “I’d stay here, you know? I mean, I’d stay in the army. Because every man has his duty in war, and here we are, in war, and I’m doing my duty. Such as it is. But this battalion is the pits. It’s *never* going to see any action! I mean, look at us. We’re not even trained. We sit around playing checkers all day; these guys eat like a pack of wolves; and nothing ever happens. It’s no wonder we haven’t won the war yet.

“If *I* were in charge,” Duan continued, “we wouldn’t be loafing around here at the outskirts of the action, I can tell you that. No, sir. We’d be right there in the thick of things, not sitting it out so far from the front lines.”

Duan hefted the buckets and began walking back up the hill in the direction of camp. “I mean,” he went on as Check fluttered above his head, “what is an army supposed to do? Fight, right? So why aren’t we fighting? Why are we still sitting here, in a place where nothing ever hap—”

Duan stopped.

“—pens?”

Duan blinked. He was supposed to be in front of the mess tent. Except the mess tent wasn't . . . exactly . . . there. It was gone. There were still potato peelings on the ground. And some overturned boiling water, still steaming. But everything else was gone. Monty was gone. The tent was gone. Captain Rickson was gone. The entire 12th Battalion was gone!

Aside from the smoke from some hastily put-out fires, and a few bits of equipment scattered here and there, the camp was empty. The evidence suggested that the battalion had picked up and left quickly. Were they retreating from a sudden attack by the enemy?

"Okay," said Duan. "Okay, Check. Okay. Don't panic."

"Gis?" Check chirped, alighting on the ground to inspect a boot that lay near where the bunks had been.

"Good. You're not panicking."

Duan was panicking. *Okay*, he reasoned, *maybe this was a mistake*. Perhaps he'd arrived at an abandoned camp instead of the 12th Battalion camp. He retraced his steps.

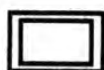
But try as he might, he could find no sign of the 12th Battalion—or of anyone at all. There was not a soul to be seen, friend or foe; even the nearby forest was strangely silent. He tried to determine where his battalion might have gone. If the Ponzo army had attacked from that direction, the battalion would have retreated in this one. Or, if his battalion had been attacking, perhaps it would have marched that way instead. But the more Duan tried to figure out the possible routes of attack and retreat, the more he just went in circles. Hadn't he seen that particular clump of underbrush before?

Suddenly Duan realized that he was deep within the forest.

He stopped and looked up. It was eerily quiet. Tall, dark trees towered over him, their branches twisted and gnarled,

casting dusky shadows that made it difficult to see through all the dense foliage.

He was completely lost.



That was three and a half days ago.

Three and a half days of trudging through the forest, trying to trap food, failing to trap food, and then trudging through the forest some more. After all that, Duan still had no food, no water, and, oh yeah, he was *still lost*.

Duan sighed, watching the sky turn red with the last of the sunset. It was as if the entire universe mocked him and his puny ambitions. *Some adventurer*, he thought. *I can't even find my way out of the forest!*

He knew how to skin fish and flop-eared rabbits, and he knew how to cook them in any number of ways. But these skills, he had quickly discovered, were useless if he couldn't *catch* any fish or flop-eared rabbits. On the second day, he had constructed a rabbit-trap out of his hat, a stick, and a piece of string made from a root he'd dug up as bait. He'd spent hours waiting in the high grass for a flop-eared rabbit to take the bait. He saw plenty of rabbits, but they always got away at the last minute, bounding off speedily into the forest. The last one had actually stolen his bait, which Duan had been starting to think about eating himself, even though he had no idea what was or wasn't poisonous in the forest.

"It's easy for *you* to survive in the wild," he said to Check, gently tapping the grinia's nose. "With a few berries or one big bug, you're good to go."

Check, munching on a fat earthworm, cocked his head and looked at him with sympathy. He held out one forepaw, in which the other half of his dinner still squirmed. "Duan, giis?" he queried. "Want bite?"

“No, thank you, Check,” said Duan, genuinely touched, if a trifle nauseated, “but that is very sweet of you. Really.”

Check flipped the last bite of earthworm into his mouth, swallowing it whole.

Duan watched his friend enjoying his dinner, and he had to admit, in his hungry state, even that earthworm looked pretty good. He’d tried to eat some berries on his first day in the forest, but the results had discouraged him from any similar experiments. He sighed, letting his eyes fall closed.

I don’t even care if it’s potatoes; I just wish I could eat a bellyful. Duan had been sick to death of potatoes, had never even wanted to *look* at another potato while he worked for Monty. But now potatoes haunted his every waking thought. A big, steaming plate of them, glistening with butter and salt. He pictured them alongside a nice roast. Yes, *some yummy rabbit, rubbed with rosemary and pepper, oh yeah, and garlic . . . That would smell delicious, roasting over an open fire . . .*

Duan opened his eyes and sniffed the air.

“Hey, wait a minute!” He sat bolt upright. “Check, do you smell that?”

Check looked at him and tapped his nose and shrugged.

“I swear, I was thinking of roast rabbit, and then . . .” Duan sniffed, looking in the direction of the wind. “But it can’t be!”

The delicious smell wafted by his nose again. Was it a hallucination? Hunger could do strange things to a man. Visual hallucinations, aural hallucinations . . .

“Is it possible to have a *nasal* hallucination?” he wondered aloud.

Stumbling in the direction of the tantalizing smell, Duan noticed a flickering fire through the trees. Check flew after him, chittering nervously from above. But Duan was too hungry to be cautious. The aroma of roasting rabbit drew him

blindly on. So blindly, in fact, that he tripped over a root and fell forward into a clearing. He raised his head.

There it was. Right in front of him, four skewers of rabbit meat, cooking over an open fire. It wasn't a hallucination. The juices sizzled; the smell was intoxicating.

"Ahhh . . ." Like a zombie, Duan reached for a skewer, his mouth watering. He could practically taste the meat already. But before he could grasp it, something whizzed past his ear and hit him smack on the back of the hand.

"OW!" Duan recoiled, holding his stinging hand. "Hey, what's the big—" He stared into a belt buckle. The buckle of a swordbelt, to be exact. "—idea?"

He looked up. Black chain mail, some heavy shoulder armor . . . There was a pain in his neck from craning his head so far back.

There, standing over him, was a man. A tall man; at least six and a half feet tall. His shoulders were broad and sturdy, and his long black hair was casually tied back with a dirty red string. His skin was rough and tanned from being outdoors. He had sharp black eyes and chiseled features, a strong chin and high cheekbones. Right now his face was stretched in a broad, mocking grin.

"Well, well, well. That's some cocky attitude you got there, kid." The tall man crossed his arms, and the smirk turned into a scowl. "For a thief who just got caught red-handed."

"I'm not—! I mean . . . I'm sorry, I just wanted . . ." Duan jumped to his feet, and the world tilted dangerously around him. Was it an earthquake? He felt all tingly and light-headed, and then pretty lights started flashing, and then everything went black. Duan fainted.



The tall stranger looked down at the unconscious boy sprawled across a tree-root at his feet. He laughed.

“Well,” he commented, “I guess he was hungry.” He shrugged and turned away, striding over to the fire, where he pulled off one of the meat skewers, blowing on it to cool it off, and sat down to enjoy his dinner.

He was Olba October. His occupation: fighter, the same as Duan’s. There the similarity ended. Unlike Duan, Olba was a *real* fighter. Just this morning, he had killed four *rizzoos* in one go—medium-level monsters, not much of a challenge for him, really—and he was on track to level up again in another hundred-odd points. He was Level 13 now, and he’d just turned twenty-four this past August.

Level 13 was pretty high for someone his age, but Olba had been a busy guy. He’d started out as an adventurer when he was only twelve years old. In those days, there was no Adventurers Club—anyone who wanted to be an adventurer was on his own. It was a tough life, and anyone who got into it at the age of twelve usually hadn’t had much of a choice in the matter. Such was the case with Olba.

The son of a woodcutter, Olba had grown up on the outskirts of a small village at the edge of a monster-invested forest. One night, a pack of werewolves grew bold and came into the village itself. It was the worst attack the town had ever seen. Shutting their windows and barring their doors, the terrified villagers huddled in their houses as, throughout the night, blood-curdling screams and howls clamored from outside.

In the morning, a band of village men went down to the October’s house to see how the woodcutter and his family had fared that night.

Approaching the house, they saw twelve-year-old Olba sitting in the middle of the yard, covered in blood and clutching

his father's gore-spattered axe tightly in his hands. The villagers approached warily.

"Where are your parents?"

"Out back," the young Olba replied in a voice so cold, it made the men shiver. He led them around the house to a pair of freshly dug graves. Above the graves were two rough wooden markers. On the markers, scrawled in a childish hand, were two words: "Mom" and "Dad."

Whispering among themselves, the villagers turned to Olba . . . and only then saw the bodies of ten werewolves stacked like logs in the woodbin beside the house.

"How did them werewolves get all stacked up like that?" one of the villagers asked the boy.

Twelve-year-old Olba shrugged. "Had to put 'em somewhere, didn't I?"

"But . . . but how . . . ?"

"They killed Mom and Dad," said Olba in a steely voice, and only then did his eyes glitter with unshed tears. "So I killed them."

"What, all of them?"

"Dad got a couple before he went down. I just finished them off."

The villagers looked at him, open-mouthed.

"I better go clean up," said Olba, heading back toward the house.

He never spoke about it again.

After that, the young Olba began obsessively developing his combat skills. He let his hair grow long—he believed in the old superstition that a man's spiritual force resided in his hair—and he never cut it again. The incident with the werewolves had given him enough points to start out as a Level 4, and pretty soon people began seeking him out for adventuring jobs, despite his

age. He had a reputation for being thorough, if a bit strange and uncommunicative. Most people just didn't feel comfortable around him.

That was all right with Olba. He preferred working alone whenever possible; other people just got in the way—and besides, you had to share the profits with them. But it didn't really matter to him much how much a mission paid, whether it was a prestigious quest, or whether it would save people. Sure, he needed to live and he wasn't above taking the occasional mercenary job when his money ran low. But in the end, he was just looking for a fight.

The bigger, the harder, the more challenging the fight, the better. It was there in his eyes when he went into battle, an almost gleeful glint as he contemplated the best tactic for taking down the creature before him. He would become weirdly detached but at the same time totally present.

He only really lived in those moments when he fought monsters, prepared to fight monsters, or honed his skills so he fought even bigger monsters. No one could say why, exactly, but it was as if, with each battle, Olba were preparing himself for some definitive showdown, which would defeat some particularly fearsome monster once and for all.

Right now, he was in the middle of a quest. And he couldn't care less about some kid who'd wandered into his camp and passed out from hunger or whatever.

Olba polished off the last of his kebab and licked his fingers. The kid still lay there, looking pale. And there was this small grinia that kept nudging him and fluttering anxiously about his head.

"Giiis, Duan! Kii!" The winged lizard landed on the kid's head and began keening. "Duan . . . Duuuuan . . ."

"Is that his name?" asked Olba. "Duan?"

Check blinked up at him with worried black eyes and nodded rapidly.

"Don't worry, little grinia. He's just fainted 'cause he's hungry. He'll open his eyes soon, you'll see." Olba got to his feet and belched loudly. He wrapped up the remaining kebabs, picked up a heavy-looking rucksack, and stamped out the embers of the fire.

Check snapped open his wings and flew in front of the tall man's face.

"Giiiis! Where man go? Where going?"

"None of your business," Olba growled, brushing him off, extremely annoyed.

"Kii! No leave! Help Duan!"

"Duan to others, eh?" Olba hefted the rucksack onto his shoulders. "Oh, all right," he said in exasperation as Check continued his nattering. "I'll leave some food, okay?"

He tossed one of the leftover skewers in Duan's direction.

"Sheesh, I could spend all day on the Good Samaritan Squad. Kid shouldn't even be out of the house." The fighter stalked off into the forest, mumbling, without a backward glance.

Check gazed after Olba with a perplexed expression, then returned his attention to Duan. "Duan? Ki?"

No response. Check then began to inspect the wrapped-up skewer that Olba had left behind.



Something was falling on his face. That much, at least, Duan could tell.

He opened his eyes.

CHARACTER FILE

Olba October

Age: 24

Height: 6' 6"

Weight: 180 lbs.

Hair: black

Eyes: black

Weapons: long sword and dagger

Defensive gear: black chain mail and iron piece-armor for his shoulders and upper torso

Other: A fighter with a sturdy build and considerable skill, he is Level 13, with 13 years of adventuring experience. Tends to avoid groups and prefers to go on quests alone.

A branch above his head swayed gently, and he could see Check's distinctive green tail snaking down from it; it looked like the grinia was sleeping well.

A soft breeze wafted falling leaves onto his face. Behind the tree branches, he saw the sky. It was deep red, with streaks of purplish gold clouds.

What a gorgeous sunset, thought Duan.

The word triggered something he was sure he was supposed to remember.

Sunset . . .

Sunset!

Duan sat up with a gasp. As he did so, a skewer of meat fell from his chest to the ground. Check, startled by Duan's sudden movement, also fell, tumbling out of his branch.

"Niii! Muuu, ehrnm . . . muhr . . ."

Duan paid no attention to Check and his gibberish. He picked up the skewer. "What the—?"

"Man leave," explained Check, who had righted himself and returned to his perch.

ADVENTURER LEVEL

I 3

Valid until:
8th August Sigress
Year 384



Name: Olba October

Date of Birth:
8th August Sigress Year 359

Residence & Citizenship:
Nirgir 677-1-2, Varl

Contact Address: See above.

Occupation: Fighter

Issue date:
8th August Sigress Year 383

Skill Points:

Strength 109
Intelligence 48
Karma 0
Magic 0

EXPERIENCE POINTS:

4370

(LEVEL-UP POSSIBLE AT 4500)

Man, wondered Duan. *Oh yeah . . .* It all came back to him now. *That guy had a wicked-looking long sword and black chain mail. He must have been an adventurer. And not only that, but a fighter!*

Duan jumped up. There was no sign of the man anywhere, and the forest was getting darker by the second. “That guy! Where did he go?”

“Gii!” squawked Check. “Man go that way.”

“Which way is that way?”

“Giii-is!” Check replied testily, still a bit sleepy and irritated. He indicated the direction with a flip of his tail. At least, that was how Duan interpreted the gesture.

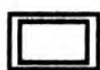
“Right. Okay. Well, we’ll just go after him.”

Duan bit down on the meat the man had left him. The kebab had gone cold, but as he ate, the juices that filled his mouth tasted like the most delicious thing he’d ever eaten in his life. He didn’t even mind the bits of dirt that still clung to the meat (or the tiny teeth marks Check had left on it; the baby grinia had been unable to resist taking a nibble or two). With this meal, Duan felt a new sense of purpose.

“Come on, Check—we have to catch up with him before nightfall!” Duan took off into the forest, chewing as he ran. The grinia, taken by surprise, struggled to keep up with him.

That man . . . He couldn’t have been a bad guy, right? Duan reasoned as he ran. *If he were, he wouldn’t have left me this food. Yeah! He’s gotta be a good guy . . .*

But whatever kind of guy he is, I need him to help me get out of this forest!



Olba October stood in front of one of the forest’s many swamps and consulted the map that had come with the scroll

summarizing the quest. Every so often, he paused to fight off the *ibras* that kept slithering out of the trees and across the ground toward him. The snakelike vines were little more than a nuisance to someone with Olba's skill and experience, but they were still a bother. Shaking a persistent *ibra* off his boot, he ground it into the mud with his heel while glancing from the map to the swamp, then back to the map again.

According to the map, this was the right direction. The trail he'd been following—which was hardly a proper trail, really, more like a muddy path beaten by monsters—was marked on the map with a cheerful blue line heading due east. But when Olba looked due east, he found himself staring at swampland surrounded by thick undergrowth, with nothing but more swamp and undergrowth beyond. He cursed under his breath.

Olba checked his compass and marked his map with a red pencil as the *ibra* he'd just stepped on twined its way up his leg. He kicked it off and, as it writhed on the ground, sliced it in half with his long sword.

If I could just do something about these damn ibras, he thought. Olba had fought *ibras* before. They were easy to kill, usually. Simply slice through the vines and they dropped down dead. But not these *ibras*. These *ibras* kept coming even after he sliced them in half. He'd think they were dead for a moment, and then they'd start moving again—and where there had been one *ibra*, suddenly there would be two. The more he sliced and diced, the more of them there were.

It's gotta be a spell, Olba thought. *This whole region simply reeks of magic.*

An *ibra* tried to strangle him, and he pushed it away impatiently. "Man, this never ends. Ow . . . OW!"

Another *ibra* dug a thorn into his hand, nearly causing him to drop his sword. Instead, he twisted away and swung the

sword's razor-sharp edge right through the ibra. The two halves lay still for a moment, then sprang up, coiling at a slight distance from his foot and preparing to strike again. Two more ibras swung down from the trees and tried to wrap around his arms.

"Arrrgh! Jeez, this is annoying!" Olba, wary of multiplying his enemies, had resorted to beating the ibras with the flat of his sword when he heard a voice behind him.

"Hello! Are you okay?"

Olba turned and groaned. It was that stupid kid again, standing up the trail from him—or stooping, rather, his lanky body heaving with each breath. He must've run the whole way.

"Get lost, kid!" Olba yelled in exasperation.

"I just wondered . . . if you needed . . . some . . ."—Duan leaned against a tree, trying to catch his breath—" . . . help," he was finally able to gasp.

"From you? That'll be the day! You can't even help your—"

Olba caught sight of something in the tree above the kid's head. A very big, very old, very thorny ibra, thick as a man's arm, was worming down the trunk toward the oblivious Duan.

"Kid!" shouted Olba. "Get away from the tree!"

"Huh?" Duan tilted his head quizzically.

"Move!" Olba yelled. "Run! It's a—"

But his voice was cut off by the shrieking of a baby grinia. "Giiii! Ka, ka, ka, ka!"

Check, ever curious, had tried to inspect the mysterious moving vine only to be caught in its tangles. His round eyes rolling in terror, the grinia struggled uselessly as the thick vine began to squeeze.

"CHECK!" Duan looked stricken. "Don't worry, Check—I'll save you!"

Duan was almost halfway up the tree before he realized that the handholds he'd used were actually parts of the ibra itself.

The predatory vine squeezed his hand, whipped itself around his body—once, twice, three times—and proceeded to crush Duan against the tree, digging its thorns into his flesh.

“Gaah!” Duan flailed about helplessly, his face digging into the tree bark. Now they were both caught.

With a sour look on his face, Olba watched the travesty unfolding before him. He sighed deeply and rolled his eyes. “Great. Here we go again . . .”

He walked over and, wielding his sword, hacked at the ibra. It gave way under his blows, dropping Duan to the ground and freeing Check, who flapped happily into the air.

“Oh, wow. Thanks.”

“Get up,” Olba retorted gruffly. “It may look dead, but there’s some kind of magic at work here, bringing the ibras back to life.”

Duan scrambled to his feet, but the slain ibra did not so much as twitch.

“Interesting,” said Olba, sheathing his sword. “The magic’s not affecting this one. Come to think of it, none of the others are attacking either. I wonder—”

The fighter was once again interrupted by a piercing scream from Check. “Gaaah! Danger! Danger!”

“Now what?” Olba drew his sword again, preparing to slice through another ibra. “Oh, crap.”

Behind the thick weave of branches, something that looked like a hill with tufts of hair on top loomed.

It . . . moved.

It . . . grunted.

The branches parted.

Duan and Olba found themselves looking up into a single, enormous EYE.

CHAPTER 3:

SMALL GIANT, BIG PROBLEM



Giants come in many sizes. A quick check of the *Monster Pocket Encyclopedia* will reveal that Duan and Olba faced one of the smaller varieties. It was only about thirteen feet tall. Nevertheless, that was large enough to leave a lasting impression on the two heroes as they stood staring up at it from the forest floor.

The gargantuan one-eyed thing advanced, shouldering its way into the clearing. At first, it looked like nothing so much as a mobile hill. Its body was huge, squat, and muscular. Its head, which appeared to be attached to its shoulders without benefit of a neck, was lumpy but a bit pointed at the top. Disorderly clumps of hair, like tangled crabgrass, sprouted from the lumps on its head and its humped back and from the backs of its hands. It was hard to tell under all the filth, but the creature seemed to be wearing a patchwork kilt clumsily sewn together from the hides of other monsters. One grimy hand dragged a tree-sized club studded with nails. The blackened, blood-

encrusted weapon left no doubt as to how the material for the kilt had been obtained.

Duan had never seen a more hideous sight. The monster's long, floppy ears drooped to its hunched shoulders, and its face looked as though it had been bashed in with a shovel. Repeatedly. It had a snub nose and horribly crooked teeth that poked out of its mouth in every direction. It lacked a chin—which turned out to be extremely unfortunate for the creature's hygiene, as the overbite caused it to drool all the way down its hairy chest and belly. A small horn protruded over its single thick eyebrow, and beneath that, one bloodshot eye, as big as a dinner plate, blinked myopically around the clearing.

"A cy-cy-cyclops?" Duan's teeth chattered as he stared in disbelief at the legendary monster. "I didn't think they really existed!"

"Long-eared variety," Olba murmured, almost to himself. "Very unusual in this part of the world."

"What do we do *now*?"

"Keep still." Olba's voice remained low and calm. "Cyclopes are very nearsighted, so if we don't make any sudden movements, he might just go away."

Indeed, the cyclops showed no sign of being able to see them at all, even though its murky red eye was directed right at them. Then it started sniffing the air.

"Uh-oh," Olba muttered.

"'Uh-oh'?"

"Long-eared cyclopes have a great sense of smell."

Duan suppressed a scream and forced himself to remain still as the cyclops took an earthshaking step toward him. The monster blinked, scanning the area, and then with its free hand, uprooted the bush next to Duan and began sniffing at it. Finding nothing, it tossed the bush away, snorting in

frustration. Duan was close enough to smell the thing's hot, rancid breath. He shook like a leaf.

Olba, unperturbed, slowly unsheathed the dagger from his hip and handed it to Duan, who had dropped his short sword during the ibra attack. Then Olba drew his long sword.

"If I remember correctly," he whispered, inching toward a nearby tree, "this thing's weak point is its *eye*."

"You're not thinking of taking it on?" Duan hissed, his eyes growing wide. "Are you *crazy*?"

Before Olba could answer him, a shriek came from the trees above. "Giiss! Danger! Danger! Giii!"

The cyclops jerked its head upward, following the sounds of distress.

"Stupid lizard!" Olba sputtered, freezing in his tracks.

With a great roar, the cyclops swung its club at the fluttering grinia.

"Check! Watch out!" Duan shouted desperately.

But it was too late. The grinia dodged the club without any problem, but the cyclops had already forgotten the winged nuisance. Now its eye focused on a new target: Duan.

It moved toward him with a roar.

"Aaaughhh!" Duan screamed and ran as the club came swinging down, smashing the ground where he'd been standing just seconds before.

"Help!" Duan cried. He turned around—and saw the fighter scaling a tree as fast as a squirrel.

"Hey, no fair!" Duan yelled. "Don't leave me alone down—" He broke off to duck as the club of the cyclops went whistling over his head.

Bobbing and weaving, Duan looked frantically for a tree of his own, but the cyclops didn't give him a chance to climb

one. It was faster than it appeared, and now that it had a fix on the puny human, it advanced rapidly, swinging its nail-studded club in circles. The enormous, bloodshot eye rolled in the creature's head, following Duan's every move.

Duan ducked behind a tree—which promptly shattered under the blows of the creature's club. Splintering wood and leaves rained down on Duan's head, and a nest of ibras, disturbed, shrieked and retreated as the giant's shadow fell over them.

"Aaaagh!" Duan ran, but it was no use. The thing came after him with enormous strides, shaking the ground with every step.

"Hey!" Duan shouted in desperation. "WHERE ARE YOU?"

"Kiii! KIII! Grahhh!" Check dive-bombed the creature's head, but the monster swatted the grinia away like a mosquito. Duan turned just in time to see the winged lizard go tumbling over the treetops.

"Check!" he yelled plaintively.

"Hrrrr." The cyclops narrowed its eye as it turned back to face Duan. The creature was so close now that Duan could see dirt and dried blood and other things he didn't want to think about crusted under its cracked fingernails.

"Now, hang on there, big guy," Duan said, backing away. "Can't we just talk this—aaah!"

He had backed into sludge. Glancing behind him, he realized that the monster had backed him up against the edge of the swamp. There was no place left to run. He was trapped.

And the cyclops knew it. With a grotesquely salivating grin, it strode toward him and raised its club again.

Duan stood his ground and brandished the dagger Olba had given him. It seemed a poor weapon under the circumstances.

What was he going to do with it—stab the cyclops in the knee? But it was better than nothing. If this was the end, he would face it as bravely as Gaeley would have done. He swung the dagger back and forth.

Snorting in annoyance, the monster smacked Duan's arm with its free hand, and the dagger went pin wheeling into the swamp.

That's it, Duan thought. It's all over. He looked up at the creature standing over him and watched as the heavy nail-studded club rose for one final blow.

I'm sorry, Gaeley. I wish I could have seen you again. Duan squeezed his eyes shut and braced himself for the inevitable.

The cyclops roared in triumph. And then . . .

"Graaaaaaargh!" A piercing scream split Duan's ears. The bloodthirsty roar of the monster turned into a high-pitched howl of . . . *pain?*

Fearfully, Duan opened his eyes. At first, all he could see was Olba's backpack. Standing on tiptoes, he craned his head over the big man's shoulder.

The cyclops staggered around the clearing, clutching its face and moaning. Fresh blood poured out of its single eye. All at once, Duan realized that Olba hadn't climbed the tree to get away, but to gain a height from which he could more easily attack. Then, just as the monster had been about to bring Duan's fighting career to an early end, Olba had jumped from the tree above, landed on the cyclops' shoulders, and thrust his long sword into the great staring eye.

The creature had been blinded, but was far from dead yet. Perhaps, Duan thought, its brain was too small to realize the seriousness of its injury. Or maybe it didn't have a brain at all. In fact, it seemed more angry than anything else. Throwing its head back in a howl of rage, it swung its club wildly through

the air. Though it couldn't see to aim, the cyclops was still dangerous; even a glancing blow would be fatal.

Without a sound, Olba ducked and dodged his way closer. Again and again, he avoided the club at the last moment. Duan was impressed; he had never seen such a display of collectedness and agility. Then, with a lunge so swift that Duan almost missed it, Olba stabbed the monster in its unprotected neck.

"Rurrghh!"

Blood gushed forth. Like a bad actor milking a death scene, the cyclops staggered backward, staggered forward, and toppled over into the swamp with a loud, dramatic splash.

Breathing heavily, Olba and Duan watched the oily bog water roll and bubble in the place where the monster had fallen.

"You did it!" shouted Duan. "You killed it!"

Olba said nothing. He kept his sword up, eyes fixed on the bubbling water as though expecting the cyclops to reemerge, magically returned to life. Suddenly . . .

BLOOP! A small wooden marionette popped to the surface and floated there like some kid's forgotten toy.

"What the hell?" Olba poked cautiously at the doll with his long sword. "Oh man. They must have used a spell! That means . . ." Olba grabbed the string around his neck and pulled out his Adventurer's Card. The card emitted a blue glow as Olba and Duan watched the points tick up magically: twenty . . . thirty . . . forty . . . forty-eight . . . forty-nine . . .

"FIFTY LOUSY POINTS?!" Olba shouted. Letting out a streak of curses that would have made a sailor blush, he swung his sword angrily at the floating marionette. There was a huge splash as the wooden doll landed on the ground.

Check fluttered down beside the doll and began examining it. Duan joined him and picked the doll up. It was a tiny replica

of the monster they had just fought, identical down to the tiniest detail. Even the wounds inflicted by Olba were present, gouged into the wood. Duan shuddered to think how close this little puppet had come to killing him. He tossed it as far as he could into the swamp.

“Meep!” Check looked at him in disappointment; the grinia hadn’t finished checking out the doll.

“Sorry, Check,” Duan said. “But no. Magic brought that thing to life once already—it might do it again.”

“I-iiik!” Check’s black eyes widened in terror; he obviously hadn’t thought of that. The grinia flew to Duan’s shoulder, where he huddled close, wrapping his long tail around his companion’s neck.

Olba went about cleaning his sword and collecting his things, still muttering and cursing under his breath. Duan could understand his frustration. If it *had* been a real cyclops, the kill would have been worth far more than fifty points—bagging such a rare and troublesome monster might even have raised Olba from a Level 13 to a Level 14. Instead, though the danger he’d faced was no less than it would have been against the genuine article, the payoff had been peanuts.

Peanuts to a fighter of Olba’s level, that is. But to Duan, who’d barely graduated from killing slimes, fifty points from a single monster was a distant dream. He stared at Olba, slack-jawed with admiration.

Feeling Duan’s eyes on him, Olba glanced over uncomfortably. “What’s the matter with you?” he growled.

Duan couldn’t answer; he just kept looking from the cyclops marionette, floating in the swamp, to Olba and back again.

“Okay, kid, clearly you’re a little slow. It’s no fault of your own. Took a few too many to the head, I guess. But we’re done

now. The bad monster's gone bye-bye, and it's time for you to do likewise. So scram!" Olba waved him away. "I've got things to do, places to be, stuff to kill."

But it was too late. Duan had made up his mind to latch onto Olba and not let go. Monsters, magic spells . . . everything about this stranger and his business convinced Duan of one thing: he was in the middle of a big, fat, honest-to-goodness QUEST! And no matter what it took, Duan would be a part of that quest. He'd stumbled onto the opportunity of his short lifetime, and he'd be damned if he would let it slip through his fingers.

Besides, he still didn't have any idea how to get out of the forest . . .

Flashing the most charming smile he could muster, Duan marched forward, his hand outstretched in greeting. "My name is Duan Surk. Sorry I didn't properly introduce myself earlier. Oh yeah, thanks for the food back there, too!" Grinning maniacally, he grabbed the fighter's hand in a hearty handshake.

Olba looked at Duan's hand as if it were something that had crawled up from the mud of the swamp. He gave it a perfunctory shake, then pulled his hand free and sniffed.

"I am Olba October," he growled. "Goodbye." He hoisted his pack and turned away, heading for the edge of the swamp.

"I'm just a beginner myself," Duan continued, running after him shamelessly. "And . . . well, Mister October, I've been watching you work and I must say I'm impressed. You are among the best, sir. I can tell that right off. Heck, you're the best *I've* seen!"

Olba snorted, drawing his long sword. He began hacking through the tangled ibras that covered the path, ignoring Duan.

"I could learn a lot from you, Mister October. I'd like a chance to work with you."

Olba didn't answer. Absorbed with the writhing mass in front of him, he continued to kill neatly and efficiently. Unlike the ibras he had faced earlier, these behaved properly and died when he sliced through them.

"I could be useful to you as well," Duan went on desperately. "I could carry your pack, and . . . and I can cook! I was an army cook, you know."

Olba said nothing, advancing step by step through the underbrush as if Duan weren't there. Duan hurried back to retrieve his shabby short sword from where he'd dropped it, then returned to join the fighter.

The two labored in silence for a while, side by side. Then Olba stopped. He looked down at Duan, who flailed at the ibras with great enthusiasm but little success. The kid clearly didn't know what he was doing. His boots were covered with twice as many ibras as he'd cut from the path. When he tried to take a step forward, he toppled into the underbrush with a cry of surprise, nearly losing his sword in the process. The big man shook his head and sighed.

"What do you think you're doing?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" Duan looked up, pulling the thorny vines from his feet and flinging them away. "I'm—ow!—I'm helping you."

"You want to help?" Olba began to lose patience. "Why don't you go find that dagger you lost at the bottom of the swamp?"

Without waiting for a reply, Olba returned to freeing the path of ibras. When he glanced up again, he saw Duan standing knee deep in the swamp, dredging mud through his fingers.

"Hey, kid, wait!" he called. "I didn't mean that you should really—"

“Got it!” Duan held the dagger aloft, grinning triumphantly. He came slogging out of the mud toward Olba and handed him the weapon.

“Sorry, I’d wipe it off, but I-I’m kind of covered in . . . sorry . . .”

Olba let out an exasperated sigh. “Look, forget it. You want out of the forest, right? Here, I’ll draw you a map.” Olba took out his map and began tearing off a corner.

“No, Mister October!” The mud-covered Duan fell to his knees in front of the fighter. “Don’t! Please!”

Olba raised an eyebrow.

“I don’t want to leave the forest. I want to go with you!” He regarded the fighter with pleading eyes.

Olba groaned. “Look here, kid, I don’t have time for this. I’m—”

“I know,” Duan interrupted. “You’re on a quest, right?”

“Maybe and maybe not. But the point is—”

“And you’ll be fighting a lot of bad guys, right?” Duan broke in again. “And they’re sorcerers, right? So—”

“Wait.” Olba raised a hand to stop the torrent of words. “How did you know that?”

“Know what?”

“All of it. The quest, the bad guys, the sorcerers. How did you know all that?”

“Well, earlier you said, ‘They must have used a spell.’ Only sorcerers use spells. And obviously these sorcerers aren’t good guys, or else they wouldn’t have used their magic to create that cyclops. And it also stands to reason that they wouldn’t have created that cyclops unless they wanted to stop you from doing something. That smells an awful lot like a quest to me. Plus, I know you’re an adventurer, because I saw your card, and that’s what adventurers do, isn’t it? They go on quests.”

Olba looked at Duan as if seeing him for the first time. He hadn't realized the kid was actually paying attention to anything he said. *Hmm, he thought, this kid may be an uncoordinated spaz, but he's not stupid. In fact, he's pretty damn smart.*

"Mister October—please!" Duan wrapped his arms around Olba's legs, hanging on so tightly that he nearly knocked the fighter over. "Please! Please, take me with you! I've been an adventurer for a whole year and I haven't even had one real adventure and I've never ever seen a fighter like you. I swear, I won't get in your way; I'll carry your bags; I'll peel your potatoes; I'll polish your boots; I'll do anything! I'm begging you, please, please, please, LET ME COME!"

Duan shut his eyes and clamped onto Olba's boots, bracing himself for the worst. He'd given it his best shot. Whatever was to come—most likely rejection, in the form of a kick—he was determined not to let go.

He waited.

And waited.

Nothing happened. Even Check was silent.

Finally, hesitantly, he opened his eyes.

Olba wasn't paying any attention to him. He was looking around, an expression of intense concentration on his face.

"Um. Mister October?"

"Shh!" Olba held up a silencing hand. He lifted his head into the wind and inhaled deeply through his nose.

"What is it? Another monster?"

"Something burning. Trees . . ." Olba sniffed again. "Close by, too."

"A forest fire?" Duan sprang to his feet.

"Yep." Olba glanced upward. "Hey, you! Grinia!"

Check gazed down with affronted dignity. "Giii! Name Check! Giis."

“Well, check where that smoke is coming from, if you don’t mind?”

Duan chimed in. “Yes, Check—fly high and tell us what you can see!”

“Giiis, Duan!” Check fluttered up into the air, over the trees, and hovered there. After a moment, he circled back down, landing on Duan’s shoulder.

“Kiii! See smoke. Over there!” The grinia pointed his tail toward the source of the smoke. He’d pointed to the same direction as the path that Olba and Duan had been cutting through the thick underbrush.

“What a coincidence,” grumbled Olba as he headed back to the path. “Right where we want to go.”

“You think it’s the work of the sorcerers?” Duan asked, trotting along beside him as Check fluttered overhead. “Some kind of trap?”

“Who cares?” Olba responded with a shrug. He raised his long sword and laid into the underbrush once again.

“I guess you’re right,” said Duan. “It *is* an adventurer’s duty to make every effort to extinguish any fires he might come across. Of course, that doesn’t apply if it’s such a huge fire that it’s too much for one individual to—”

“Kid!” Olba shouted. “Less talking, more cutting!” He kicked Duan’s shabby short sword in its owner’s direction.

Duan looked at the sword at his feet and then back at Olba. His heart leapt. “You mean it?”

“What,” inquired Olba. “You want an engraved invitation?”

Without another word, Duan jumped in beside Olba, hacking away at the vines.

“This pack is slowing me down,” Olba said after another moment. He shucked it off and passed it to Duan, who

staggered at the weight of it and would have dropped it if Olba hadn't lent a hand.

"What's the matter now, kid? I thought you said you'd carry my stuff."

"Y-yes. Of course, Mister October!"

With Olba's assistance, Duan got the pack strapped to his own back. It left him bowed like an old man, and its straps dug painfully into his shoulders, but he vowed not to utter a word or even a sound of complaint.

"All set?" Olba asked.

"All set, Mister October, sir," he managed to squeak.

"Great. There's one more thing you can do for me."

"Of course. What is it?"

"Stop calling me 'Mister October.' It makes me feel old. Olba is fine. Oh, and one more thing."

Duan gulped as Olba pointed toward him with the long sword.

"If you ever grab onto my boots like that again," Olba stated, "I will drop kick you all the way to Ponzo."

"It won't happen again, Mister—uh, Olba! I promise."

But Olba wasn't looking at Duan anymore. He had turned back to the ibras and was making short work of them now that he'd been relieved of the hindering weight of his pack.

Duan struggled beneath the extra load, but his spirit felt as though it were floating. As he attacked the vines alongside Olba, he smiled from ear to ear.

CHAPTER 4:

BEAUTIFUL BUT DEADLY



ell,” Olba commented as they came into the clearing. “This isn’t so bad.”

They stood at the edge of a rough circle of smoking ground. The grass and underbrush had been scorched black, and a few low-hanging branches still burned, if feebly. The marshy ground had been able to contain the blaze, and the fire had mostly burned itself out. Within minutes, Olba and Duan were able to extinguish the smoldering remains.

Once that was done, Check nosed around the perimeter, sniffing the burnt grass. “Fire! Circle!” he observed. “Kii!”

Olba ignored him. Leaning casually against a tree, he pulled a pouch of tobacco out of his pocket and rolled a thin cigar. It was dusk; behind the bare branches of the burnt and twisted trees, the sky was a deep blue streaked with dark clouds.

“We’ll rest for a minute, then go a little farther before we set up camp,” said Olba, lighting his cigar from the embers of a charred ibra. “The ground here is still too soggy.”

Duan nodded. Dropping the fighter's heavy rucksack, he stretched his aching back and took a look around. The ground continued to sink in the direction they were headed, but a low rise appeared beyond the trees up ahead. The dense greenery there gave no sign of having been disturbed. Duan saw lush ferns and thickets of marsh grass, and growing on the surface of a boulder half-hidden behind a shrub—

"Hey!" he said excitedly. "There's some sye mushrooms on that boulder over there! You ever had those?"

Olba shook his head without bothering to look.

"They're amazing! Monty showed me how to cook 'em. If we could get over there and pick some, I could make them for dinner!"

Olba exhaled a puff of smoke. "What do you mean, 'we'?"

Duan felt himself blush. "Or, uh, *I* could get over there and pick them."

"Now you're talking." Olba lounged against the tree, smiling. "Have fun!"

Duan moved carefully across the marshy ground, chattering as he went, "Oh man, Olba, when you taste these mushrooms, you're not going to believe how good they are!"

"What, those fluorescent purplish things? They look poisonous to me."

"A lot of people think that, on account of the weird color. But they're not. Syes have a very distinctive taste, and they're kind of crunchy, too! I'm telling you, Olba, you'll be thanking me big time for this!"

Licking his lips, Duan drew near the boulder. He could see what looked like hundreds of the tasty mushrooms dotting its surface just behind the shrub.

Should I steam them, he wondered, or just roast them on skewers? Mmm, it's making my mouth water just thinking about it.

Duan was preparing to push the shrub aside and reach for the mushrooms glowing freakishly beyond it, when he sensed . . . something. He held his breath—and something else breathed. Something big, by the sound of it. Duan froze.

“O-Olba?” he whispered weakly.

Before he could say another word, a white beast pounced from behind the boulder, moving so fast that it was hardly more than a blur.

“Aaaaa—!”

Duan's scream was cut off as the thing bowled into him. The next thing he knew, he was sprawling on the muddy ground, pinned on his back. He felt the weight of huge paws on his shoulders and heard a low, guttural growl. Moist, warm breath gusted over his face, smelling of rotten fish. He was afraid to open his eyes.

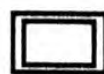
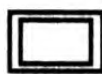
“Rrrrrrrr . . .”

But if he was going to die, he didn't want to do it with eyes closed, like a coward. He forced himself to open his eyes. He immediately wished he hadn't—for he now stared at a set of the biggest, sharpest fangs he had ever seen.

“Danger! Danger! Giiiis!” Check screeched from somewhere above him.

“Oh, thanks a *lot!*” Duan muttered sarcastically.

DUAN'S RECIPES



Despite their grotesque color, sye mushrooms are prized for their fresh taste and invigorating texture. You can simply eat them fried, but they are excellent cooked together with pappara until thoroughly wilted. If you can't get hold of any pappara, you can use cobo instead. Salt lightly and serve piping hot.

The creature growled a warning, digging its claws deeper into his shoulders. Duan cried out in pain and terror.

“Hold still and stop making so much noise,” hissed Olba’s voice from behind him.

Easy for you to say! thought Duan. But he managed to hold his tongue.

The white beast snarled loudly.

“Hold on, Duan.” Olba’s voice sounded nearer. “I’m coming.”

At that, the beast tensed and sprang off Duan with enough force to knock the breath out of the boy. Gasping, he rolled to one side. By the time he’d caught his breath, the creature was squaring off against Olba.

Wow, Duan thought. *That thing is massive!*

Standing on all fours, the creature’s head reached the height of Duan’s shoulders, and its body gleamed like marble in the twilight. Olba stood stock-still as well, sword in hand. For a moment, the two of them formed a tableau in the dying light: man against beast, neither stirring an inch or drawing a breath, each waiting for the other to make the next move.

Then the thing’s tail twitched and the spell was broken. Duan saw that he was not looking at marble, but at a glossy white coat of fur. Black spots appeared to hover over the tensely muscled body.

A snow leopard?

Moving silently, the great cat turned, circling its adversary, and bared its teeth in a warning snarl. Duan could see that the creature had one lightning-shaped mark on its forehead, between luminous, deep blue eyes. They seemed to sparkle and change color as he looked into them. For a moment, Duan forgot the danger, struck by the extraordinary beauty of this mythic creature.

Wow, first a cyclops, now a snow leopard. This is the stuff of legends! I never dreamed—

“Kid!” Olba’s voice snapped him out of his reverie. “This thing will bewitch you with its eyes. Don’t look into them!”

Duan shook himself. Of course! Snow leopards mesmerized their prey with their luminescent eyes—he had totally forgotten. He averted his gaze, coming back to reality. The creature was beautiful but deadly! He had to stay focused and resist the magic.

Magic . . . Hey, could this be another marionette?

Before he had time to ponder the question further, the snow leopard sprang at Olba.

“Whoa!” Olba dodged to one side, narrowly escaping the attack. Without missing a beat, he lashed out with his sword, but the leopard batted the weapon away with a single swipe of its paw.

“Damn! I hate it when that happens!” Olba started to retrieve his lost sword, but the leopard moved swiftly to cut him off.

It bared its teeth in a snarl and crouched low, ready to pounce again. “Rrrrr . . .”

“RRRRR!” With a growl of his own, Olba pulled his dagger from his boot.

“Danger, Olba! Giii!” cried Check, choosing that moment to swoop low over the combatants.

“What the . . . ?”

Taking advantage of Olba’s distraction, the creature leapt. A split-second later, Duan realized that Olba had only been feigning. He’d *wanted* the leopard to attack. Now, to Duan’s astonishment, Olba met it head on. He ducked under the beast’s meaty forepaws, ignoring its claws, and slammed one armored shoulder into its furry chest, knocking it to the

ground. But the big cat pulled Olba down with it, and the two fell into the mud together, locked in a fatal embrace.

Duan flinched but could not take his eyes off them. He felt that he should do something, but what? Throw a rock? He might hit Olba—and besides, he sensed that the fighter didn't want him to interfere. He watched in awe, hypnotized by the timeless battle between man and beast.

At last, though flat on his back, Olba forced one hand beneath the snow leopard's chin and pushed its head back with what seemed to Duan like superhuman strength. In his other hand, the dagger was poised to strike. Just as Olba was about to drive the blade into the creature's throat, a voice from right behind Duan called out:

"Hey, you big bully! Leave my K'nock alone!"

Turning toward the unexpected voice, Duan found himself staring at a young girl. She looked close to his age, maybe slightly younger. Her disheveled hair was the color of fire and ran in thick curls down to her hips. In contrast to the mass of her hair, her body was slim; she seemed too delicate a creature to be tramping around in a dangerous forest. Her skin was pale, nearly translucent. In one hand she held a long and slender staff topped with a silver winged orb. A sheen of sweat clung to her forehead, and her cheeks were smudged with soot—probably from the forest fire, Duan thought.

She was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

The girl ignored Duan. "K'nock!" she cried imperiously, snapping her fingers.

The snow leopard responded instantly. Before Olba could react, the creature bounded away with a haughty grace, leaving the fighter sprawled in the muck. Duan and Olba watched in amazement as the snow leopard, like some huge housecat, obediently went to the girl's side, nestled against her,

and started purring contentedly . . . if a sound like rumbling thunder could be called “purring.” Standing beside the girl, the proud creature regained his statuesque composure, exhibiting all the protectiveness of a guardian knight.

The girl glared at them with eyes like dark amethysts, defiance and anger smoldering in their depths. “What do you think you are doing with my K’nock?” she demanded.

“*Your* K’nock?” Olba pulled himself up stiffly, wiping the mud off his knees. He snickered contemptuously. “Let me tell you something, lady—that’s one *brutal* pet you’ve got there. You might consider putting a leash on him the next time you take him for a walk. Or better yet, a muzzle.”

“Why, so you can kill him more easily?” the girl retorted. “Don’t bother denying it. You were trying to kill him for his pelt. I know what snow leopard fur brings on the black market!”

The accusation rendered Olba momentarily speechless. “Are you *kidding* me?” he sputtered. “That thing’s a menace! It attacked us unprovoked—right, Duan?”

Duan was staring too intently at the girl to answer. Her bravado faded at Olba’s words, and for a second, Duan thought he saw her sway, as if she might fall.

“K’nock?” She looked down at the snow leopard. “Is that true?” The words had barely passed her lips before her eyes rolled back in her head and she collapsed to the ground in a heap.

Olba snorted in disgust. “What is this, the latest *trend*?”

“Are you okay?” Duan tried to rush to the girl’s assistance but stopped abruptly at the snow leopard’s growl. The big cat had one protective paw on his mistress and eyed Duan warily.

“Uh, nice kitty. Look, I won’t hurt her. I only want to help. You know, *help*?” Duan took a timid step forward. “I-I’m just worried about her.”

He held out a trembling hand in supplication, hoping his message would get across. Apparently, it did. The snow leopard lifted his paw and drew back slightly, letting Duan approach.

“Thanks,” said Duan. He bent down to examine the unconscious girl, laying his hand against her forehead.

“Giii-iis!” Check, who had been hiding in the bushes during the fight, picked this moment to reveal himself, flapping up into the air past a startled Olba. “Gii! Girl sick? Kii-i!”

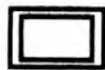
He flew toward the girl, curious as ever, but a growl from the snow leopard sent him fluttering to Duan’s shoulder instead.

Duan waved the grinia away. “Check, I’m trying to concentrate.”

“Ah, jeez . . .” Olba turned away. “I don’t have time for this nonsense.”

The fighter stalked off and stood at a distance with his arms crossed, sulking. The quest was falling apart around him. *This is hopeless, he thought. The kid was bad enough. Now, on top of that, a sick girl? I’m getting a headache. Even worse, the kid’s gonna be a sucker for the old damsel-in-distress routine, I can see it plain as day. I should just write them both off as a bad bet.*

Olba sighed. *I can’t just leave them here. Not if I want to sleep at night. Aw, man. I’m going to have to take her, too, aren’t I?* Olba cursed under his breath. “When did I start running a kindergarten?” the fighter muttered to himself as he strode toward Duan and the unconscious girl.



Duan was bent over her. Up close, he thought she looked more beautiful than ever. Even under the soot and dirt there was a kind of elegance to her features that he’d never seen before. Her hair spilled over the mossy ground, and there was a faint, sweet smell, like jasmine, coming off her. For some reason, it

was completely disconcerting. He pulled a handkerchief out of his vest, patted away some of the soot and perspiration on her face, and felt for a temperature.

"So what's the score?" Olba asked sharply from behind Duan. "Is she sick?"

"Hang on!" Duan replied. He took the girl's slender wrist in his hand and began counting to himself. Finally he said, "Her pulse is steady and she doesn't seem to have a fever."

"Heeey, are you a *doctor*?" Olba raised an appreciative eyebrow.

Duan laughed. "Oh, no. I can't do that much, really."

"But you know how to, you know, do . . . pulses and bandages and stuff?"

"I know a little," Duan admitted. "Just from watching the doctor when I was a kid." He smiled up at Olba and continued his examination.

Duan was being modest. The truth was that his childhood doctor, Dr. Torin, had taken a liking to his young patient and showed him a thing or two. Recognizing the boy's sharp mind and lively curiosity, the doctor had lent Duan some books and taught him a few fundamentals of medicine. It helped to relieve the boy's boredom—and besides, there had always been something about Duan that made people want to teach him. Perhaps Olba had picked up on it as well.

Olba leaned over Duan, watching with interest as he worked. There were few things the fighter respected more than combat skills, but the arcane realm of medical knowledge was one of them: it was useful and it took real brains.

Hmm, he thought. Maybe it wasn't such a bad idea to bring the kid along after all.

"She doesn't seem to be wounded, and as far as I can see, there's no bones broken," Duan continued. "I can't tell more

without, um, compromising the young lady's modesty." He started to blush furiously. He hoped Olba wouldn't notice.

Olba didn't. He frowned down at the unconscious girl. "So, she's just taking a nap?"

"I think she's exhausted."

"*Exhausted?*"

"Yeah." Duan turned away from the girl and picked up Olba's backpack. "Come on, Olba. Help me move her to a better place to sleep."

Olba blinked in disbelief. Had the tables turned when he wasn't looking? Since when did this kid give the orders?

"Are you talking to *me*?" he asked, pointing at himself in a gesture he hoped would convey some fraction of the icy disdain he felt toward Duan at the moment.

"Well, yeah," said Duan, slightly irritated. "I mean, I've got your backpack and there's her stuff too. I can't do everything myself."

"Everything your—Now, hang on!"

The fighter was indignant, but Duan was already occupied with the girl's trunk and stuff. "So if you could—oof—just carry her a little farther, we can find a place to set up camp. Ow. Man, what's she got in this thing? Bricks?"

It was a leather trunk, the kind that rolls along on the ground. Nice, smooth ground, that is, not the cluttered and muddy ground of a forest.

"I guess I could try and lay it on top of the snow leopard," Duan mused, "but we don't have a harness." Nor, to be honest, did he relish the idea of getting any closer to the big cat than he already was. In the end, he just dragged the trunk along as he struggled under the weight of Olba's backpack, which had gotten a bit heavier thanks to a certain grinia perched atop it.

Olba shook his head, then looked at the girl on the ground. "Terrific," he muttered. "First you, now her. Throw in the stupid flying lizard and the big cat and we've got a traveling circus." Sighing, Olba bent to pick up the girl.

"Rrrrr . . ." The snow leopard bared its teeth and tensed.

"Oh, shut up!" the disgruntled Olba shouted.

"Come on, you guys." Duan glanced back with a smile. "Quit playing around. It's getting dark. We've got real work to do."

With that, he turned and staggered off into the forest.

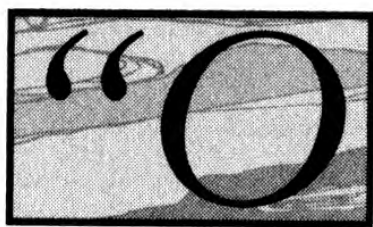
Olba stared after him, dumbfounded. "Can you believe that kid?" he muttered to himself. "Talking to me that way? As if he's got a clue where to set up camp!"

"Rrrrrr!"

"Don't you start," Olba said to the snow leopard as he hoisted the limp form of the girl into his arms and hurried after Duan. The big cat followed, moving as quietly as fog. Nonetheless, Olba couldn't shake the feeling that the damn thing was laughing at him.

CHAPTER 5:

WHERE ARE THE WITCHES?



Olba, tell me about this quest you're on."

Duan and Olba lounged around a crackling fire after finishing off a meal of sycamore mushrooms and leftover rabbit meat. Having found a soft, grassy spot some twenty minutes' walk from the clearing where they'd met the girl, the two adventurers had set up camp and now rested comfortably, warmed, swaddled in camp blankets.

Duan lay on his side, watching the flames dance around the logs as Olba leaned back against his pack, stirring the glowing embers with a stick and taking occasional swigs from a pewter flask that glinted dark gray in the firelight.

The girl slept so soundly on the other side of the fire that it seemed she might never wake. The snow leopard never left her side, but now it slept too, or at least lay quietly with its eyes closed.

Check, a few feet away, was beside himself with curiosity, wanting to know whether the big cat was asleep or not so that he could creep up and examine the girl. From

time to time, he would crane his neck forward and chirp softly to himself, but he didn't dare venture any closer.

"Go on, tell me," Duan prompted when Olba did not reply.

Red flecks from the fire danced up into the night sky.

Olba took another swallow from the flask and then stretched luxuriously. "All right. I'll tell you. It was store-bought."

"What, from the Adventurers Club?"

Olba gave a derisive snort. "Are you kidding? This is a Scenario Shop quest."

Duan propped himself up on one elbow, eyes sparkling with excitement. *The Scenario Shop!* That was where the high-level adventurers went to buy rumors and barter information on quests. The Adventurers Club sponsored a program somewhat like it, but generally the Club dealt with pretty low-end stuff—beginner quests with minimal payoffs. The *real* action was at the Scenario Shop. That's where the most interesting quests were to be found, the ones with the best "cost-performance" ratio. Of course, there were plenty of hack quests, not to mention useless information and outright scams, floating around the Shops as well, but a competent adventurer could usually tell the difference. Or so Duan had heard. He'd never actually been inside a Scenario Shop himself.

He couldn't believe his luck. "Wow," he said dreamily. "The big leagues!"

"Yeah. And just so we're clear," Olba pointed the stick at him and looked him in the eye, "this quest is all *mine*. Any treasure we find belongs to me, got it?"

Duan nodded furiously. "Of course! Keep it. I don't want any treasure."

I'd be happy just to SEE real treasure, he thought with a thrill. And maybe get an experience point or two.

He waited for Olba to tell him more. But instead of continuing, Olba drew a browned parchment scroll from his pack and tossed it in Duan's direction.

Duan caught the scroll and unrolled it impatiently. He read the title of the quest, and then raised his head. He looked at Olba with a stunned expression.

"The Witches' Forest?"

"You've heard of it?"

"Um . . . of course," lied Duan.

Olba smirked as if he could see right through him. "I got it for cheap a couple of years ago," he went on expansively. "Never had a chance to use it before. But I just happened to be in the area after my last quest, and it's about a twelve on the Quest scale, so I figured I'd have a go. Besides," and here a sheepish look came over the fighter, "I need the money."

The truth was, Olba wore borrowed armor. His own armor had been lost in his last quest—stolen in one of the port towns of Ponzo. The worst part was, he knew the guy—a thief named Gam. They'd been hired together for a mercenary job. Olba preferred to work alone, but in this case he'd made an exception, partly because of the difficulty of the quest, but mainly because the money was too good to turn down, and Gam was part of the package. His new partner had turned out to be an asset: a good fighter who knew when to keep his mouth shut—unlike certain kids he could think of—and they'd become friends. After the quest was over, the two of them had taken their money and stopped off at an inn for a celebratory drink or twelve and a good night's sleep before going their separate ways. The next morning, when Olba woke up, Gam and the money were

gone—and so was his magical armor! It still burned him up to think about it.

That's the last time I take a job with a thief. I should have known better! Olba took a deep swig from the flask, angry from recalling the injustice. *If I ever cross paths with Gam again . . .*

In any case, he needed some new armor, and since good armor cost a bucket-load, he had to raise a fair amount of dough, and he had to do it quickly because he'd promised to return the armor as soon as possible to the friend from whom he'd borrowed it. The Witches' Forest quest, which he'd been carrying around for years, had seemed like the answer to all his troubles: the forest was nearby and the payoff was good. The profits from this quest would be enough for him to get a really good set of armor, with some added protective power to boot.

While Olba brooded, Duan read the scroll, his eyes growing wider and wider. It seemed that, unbeknownst to him, he had stumbled into the Witches' Forest. According to the quest summary, the entire forest was under a powerful spell that caused all those who entered it to lose their sense of direction. Such unfortunates could wander in the forest for days, even weeks, going in circles without even knowing it. Even a compass was useless, as the enchantment warped the magnetic fields in the area; the needle would swing crazily with every step, never finding true north.

"Enchanted, huh?" Duan nodded to himself. "Well, *that* explains a lot."

"Yeah, it's tricky." Olba grinned. "That's why I keep this baby around."

Olba pulled a compass from his pocket and showed it to Duan. The casing was engraved with the words: "Ankerlet's Pan-Directional, Patent Pending, 383, Ring Wanda Inc."

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"A compass?" queried Duan. "But it says here—"

"This is a magic compass," Olba interrupted. "Guaranteed against curses, invocations, enchantments, and all major or minor charms. If the magnetic fields have been tampered with, the compass instantly corrects itself, reversing the effect of the spell."

"Wow. So that's how you've kept from getting lost in here!"

"A seasoned adventurer comes prepared for everything, kid." Olba gave the compass a smacking kiss, then stuck it back into his pocket.

"Olba?"

"Yeah, kid?"

"If this is the Witches' Forest . . . where are the witches?"

Olba leaned back with a smile. "Read on."

Duan skimmed down the page. "Ogma and Samra?" He whispered the names with awe.

I think I've heard of them. They must be very powerful!

According to the summary, Ogma and Samra were twin witches who guarded the forest. Actually, they were more than just guardians. They were menaces, known for inflicting powerful punishments on behalf of whoever hired them . . . and for having a twisted sense of humor. They were reported to have amassed a huge treasure, which they kept in their mansion somewhere deep in the forest.

Ogma and Samra . . . Duan could almost see the witches now—shriveled, wrinkled old crones with black capes and pointed hats, cackling evilly as they sat on a gigantic pile of treasure. He bet they looked exactly like a pair of crows.

Witches . . . monsters . . . spells . . . treasure . . .

“It’s perfect,” Duan murmured to himself. “A perfect quest!”

“Yeah . . .” Olba tried not to show how pleased he was with himself, but he puffed out his chest with pride at the young man’s admiration. “Yeah, it ain’t bad. Especially considering I only bought it for four hundred guilders.”

“Four hundred G! This scenario?”

“Yeah, I talked the guy down from six hundred.”

“Woow. That’s amazing!”

“Being a successful adventurer is about more than just fighting,” Olba said. “You gotta know how to drive a hard bargain.”

“I can see I’m going to learn a lot from you, Olba,” Duan said admiringly.

“Er . . .” Was it just the play of firelight, or was the big fighter actually blushing? “Better let me have that scroll back before you drop it in the fire or something,” Olba said gruffly.

Smiling to himself, Duan handed Olba the scroll.

The fighter tucked it safely back into his pack. “Let’s get some shut-eye, kid. It’s been a long—”

Suddenly, Check started squawking. “Giii! Girl awake! Wakey wakey! Chaaa!”

CHAPTER 6:

GIRL + BOYS = TROUBLE



either Duan nor Olba had been paying much attention to the girl, but Check had been watching her diligently. Now he jumped around, chattering excitedly:

“Giii! Sick girl awake!”

Duan glanced over to where the girl lay curled up beside the snow leopard. Her eyes were shut and she seemed to be breathing peacefully. “Shh, Check! Stop being so noisy, or you *will* wake her up.”

“Girl awake already,” the grinia insisted.

“Better take a closer look,” Olba grunted.

Duan walked over to the girl. Check fluttered up to his shoulder and perched there, clinging to Duan’s neck with his long tail. Ignoring him, Duan peered down at the girl. She appeared to be sound asleep. In the glow of the firelight, her face looked even more beautiful—the light glinted off her thick red hair and played across her fine features.

Wow. Girls are so soft and pretty. Oh my gosh—did I really just think that? Just as Duan caught himself having this ridiculously corny thought, the girl's eyelids twitched.

"Giii! Eyes move!" cried Check.

Duan bent over her. "Hey. Girl. You awake?"

Her eyelids began to twitch even more, but she didn't move. Duan smirked.

"There's no use pretending you're asleep," he remarked. "For one thing, you stopped snoring."

With that, the girl's eyelids flew open and she sat bolt upright. "I don't *snore!*" she shouted at Duan, startling Check, who flew up a tree.

Duan laughed as the girl stood up. "I see where that snow leopard of yours gets its charm!"

"K'nock is a *he*, not an *it*." The girl brushed herself off and, without a second glance at Duan, stalked toward Olba.

Well, thought Duan, she seems lively enough. I guess she's going to be okay.

Olba, who had just taken a sip from his flask, watched bemused as the girl came charging toward him. At first he thought she would barrel right into him, but she stopped at the last moment. She gave him a hard look, then, before he could say a word, reached down and grabbed his upper arm. She cocked her head to one side, examining the arm as if appraising a piece of meat. Finally, releasing him, she said: "That kid over there looks pretty useless. But you—you'll do."

"Hey!" Duan cried angrily. "Who are you calling a kid? You're not any older than me—in fact, you're probably younger!"

The girl paid no attention to him. She addressed herself to Olba, pushing out her lower lip defiantly. "My name is Agnis," she said. "Agnis Link. I heard everything you were saying just

now about the Witches' Forest and those two sorceresses, Ogma and Samra."

Olba shrugged and took another swig from his flask.

"As a matter of fact," Agnis went on, "I'm also going after those two and their treasure. I was on the way to their mansion with my *snow leopard*"—as if on cue, the snow leopard raised its head and let out a well-timed growl—"when we happened to run into you."

Olba gave an exaggerated yawn. "So?"

"Well, I thought that since we're both—"

"You can forget about that right now," interrupted Olba. "You're not coming with us. Now go lie down somewhere and let me sleep."

The girl flushed red. "Are you *dismissing* me?"

"You're welcome to share our fire for tonight," Olba said. "But come tomorrow," he made a shooing motion with his hand, "you're on your own."

"Well, I . . . How *rude!*" Agnis sputtered. "You didn't even hear the end of my story! You could at least let a person finish talking before you—"

"*Finish* talking?" Olba turned toward Duan. "Can you believe this brat?"

"Brat!" cried the girl before Duan could answer. "How dare you—?"

"Look, girly," Olba interrupted again. "Me and the kid are trying to get some shut-eye. Either lie down and shut up, or take your snow leopard and go make noise somewhere else. That's my final word, and there's nothing you can say to make me change my mind. Got it?"

There was a moment of silence. The girl looked like she'd swallowed a hot pepper. She was clearly struggling to keep down the words that popped into her head.

Check, from the tree branch where he'd taken refuge, watched her with evident consternation. Duan wasn't too sure he wanted to get any closer to her.

As for Olba, he lay back and shut his eyes, seeming to fall asleep at once.

Agnis took a deep breath and cleared her throat. "How about if I pay you?"

At that, Olba opened one eye. "Okay, maybe I was a little hasty there."

Agnis couldn't quite keep the smirk from her face. "I thought you looked like a mercenary."

Olba did not seem to take offense. "My services'll cost you a five thousand guilder deposit, plus fifteen thousand G on completion," he said cheerfully and extended his hand to seal the bargain.

"Twenty thousand?" Agnis screeched. "You've got to be kidding! That's twice the market price!"

"No deal?" Olba shrugged. "Suit yourself." But as he started to withdraw his hand, Agnis grabbed it.

"Deal! Deal! Here, take this." Agnis pulled a ring from her hand and dropped it into Olba's.

It was a ruby crest—a small flower carved into a large cut ruby. In the reflected light of the fire, it flickered and burned as if it held its own flame.

Olba regarded it skeptically.

"It's worth ten thousand G at least," Agnis stated as if such a sum was nothing to her.

"Whoa." Duan drew close, gawking. "That's an amazing shade of red. And look how it sparkles! Like it's on fire inside. It's beautiful!"

"Gii!" Apparently Check, who had flown back to Duan's shoulder, agreed.

As usual, Agnis paid no attention to either of them. She continued to gaze intently at Olba. "Well?"

Olba turned the ring between two fingers. "I usually work only for cash."

The girl's face fell.

"But there are always exceptions." Olba pocketed the ring and flashed Agnis a smile. "It looks real enough. And as Duan said, it *is* an amazing color."

For the first time since they'd seen her, Agnis smiled. Her face brightened and she seemed to relax a little. Seeing her beaming face, Duan felt himself getting dizzy.

"That's right," he said, unaware that he was babbling. "I said that! And it certainly is an amazing color, yes, that it is. I was right about that. I've never seen anything like it!"

"Er, whatever you say, kid." Olba glanced at the girl and rolled his eyes. "Now, where were we? Oh, yeah. My fee. Your ring covers only half at most. How are you going to pay the rest?"

"I'll give up my share of the treasure," Agnis said.

Duan raised an eyebrow. "But why would you—"

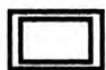
Before he could finish, Agnis turned and glared at him. "For my own reasons, all right?" she snapped. "I think I'm paying enough that you can mind your own business."

Olba watched the exchange thoughtfully and seemed to be mulling something over. "All right," he agreed at last. "I'll take your share as the balance. But let's get one thing straight. Even though you're paying me, I'm the team leader. You need to follow my orders. Where we're going is dangerous, and if I'm guessing correctly, neither of you has a whole lot of experience. So what I say goes, okay?"

Agnis nodded silently. Duan and Check also nodded.

"Okay." Olba surveyed the bright, hopeful faces of the

young people in front of him. *Oh man*, he thought. *We are so horribly doomed.*



A word must be said at this point concerning the young girl who has just joined the heroes, Agnis R. Link.

Duan had guessed correctly: Agnis was the same age as he—sixteen years old. To be precise, she was a few months younger than Duan, as her birthday was in June. She was a sorceress who had learned offensive magic by attending part-time magic school. Like Duan, she had only recently become an adventurer. Her level was three, though she was able to cast magic spells at a much higher level. This had surprised everyone, including her teachers at the magic school. But there was a reason for the discrepancy.

Agnis' mother had been an Elementaller—as a result of some faerie blood in her lineage, she had been gifted at birth with the spirit power of fire. Unfortunately, Agnis had not inherited her mother's powers. However, she *did* have an inborn affinity for the element of fire, and high-level offensive spells utilizing fire came naturally to her.

The truth was, that while Agnis was a peculiarly gifted fighter, her other skills as a magician were far from impressive. In fact, she couldn't even do a basic "tea-stirring" spell. Her time in magic school had been brief, and even though she liked the idea of being a sorceress, she'd found the study and practice of magic boring; she lacked the patience to plod through anything that did not come easily to her. So she decided to skip ahead in the textbook. While her classmates practiced how to cast minor summoning spells and levitate silverware, Agnis had jumped to the more flashy fire manipulations, because, well, she was good at those.

CHARACTER FILE

Agnis R. Link

Age: 16

Height: 5' 5"

Weight: 116 lbs.

Hair: red

Eyes: purple

Weapons:

Defensive gear:

Other: A witch descended from an Elementaller. Offensive magic is her forte, in particular Fire, which she can use to a very high level—albeit with debilitating results.

K'nock

A snow leopard; a legendary monster said to be able to use illusionary magic. He is always by Agnis' side, protecting her.

Needless to say, Agnis' very selective approach to her education posed some serious problems. For one thing, she had very little control over her powers. Even worse, using such potent magic drained her strength, leaving her weak and helpless . . . if not unconscious. Sure, she could summon up a fireball to impress the kids in school, but she would usually faint right afterward.

As a matter of fact, that was what had happened just before Duan and Olba had encountered

her. The forest fire they had rushed to extinguish had been caused by one of Agnis' Fire spells.

In the time that Agnis had been wandering through the enchanted forest prior to meeting Olba and Duan, she had encountered a number of formidable monsters—tree demons mostly and a few swamp goblins. She'd beaten them all—but not with her magic. Actually, K'nock had done all the fighting. So she'd been at the full strength of her powers, feeling good, at the top of her game. Then, making her way through the swamp, she'd stepped on something squishy. She glanced down—and saw the forest floor covered with a swarm of ugly green slimes.

And she lost it.

See, this was the thing about Agnis. She was very short-tempered and she had a very strong sense of justice. So whenever she witnessed or even heard of any injustice—boom!

She'd go ballistic and let loose a Level 10 fireball, setting everything around her ablaze.

Then she'd promptly faint from exhaustion.

The family of green slimes had committed the dreadful injustice of existing where Agnis wanted to walk, and of squishing all over her boots. Now, maybe that doesn't seem like much of an injustice. And if Agnis had stopped to think about it, she probably would have agreed. She might even have gone so far as to admit that green slimes had as much right to exist as anything else . . . although maybe not—squishy things in general made her crazy.

But she didn't stop to think. Her temper kicked in, and the blazing fire of justice issued forth, evaporating the slimes without a trace. Then she had passed out. Moments later, Duan and Olba had arrived and extinguished the remains of the fire. It was the sounds of the fight between Olba and K'nock that had woken her, but even then she'd still been so weak, she'd fainted again almost immediately.

Agnis had been trying to keep a low profile on her trek through the forest. As befit a witch, she wore a cloth robe

ADVENTURER LEVEL

3

Valid until:
2nd July,
Sigress Year 384



Name: Agnis R. Link

Date of Birth:
2nd June, Sigress Year 367

Residence & Citizenship:
Fiana

Contact Address: See above.

Occupation: Sorcerer

Issue date:
2nd July, Sigress Year 383

Skill Points:

Strength 19
Intelligence 41
Karma +9
Magic 33

EXPERIENCE POINTS:

470

(LEVEL-UP POSSIBLE AT 500)

and a plain cloth cloak. The colors were drab and she looked shabby. At least she was *trying* to look shabby. She was traveling incognito, hoping to pass by unnoticed.

Of course, it wouldn't have mattered if Agnis had been dressed in a burlap sack. Her unearthly beauty screamed for attention: the flaming, silky red hair; the striking violet eyes; the translucent skin; the fine features. Anyone she walked past couldn't help but take a second glance. To top it off, a rare snow leopard traveled at her side. Yeah, so much for "incognito."

Setting things on fire didn't really help much in that department, either.

But Agnis was blissfully unaware of how noticeable she was. She truly thought that no one would give her a second look in her drab cloak. Besides, even if they did, nobody around here knew who she really was. The only people who might recognize her were far away, and none of them had the slightest idea that she had entered the forest.

At least, that's what she told herself. Unfortunately, she was wrong on all counts.

Someone did know who she really was. Someone did know that she had entered the forest. A man had been shadowing her from the moment she'd set out on her quest, stalking her, always keeping his distance, waiting for the right moment to make his presence known.

That man was an assassin.

He sat up in a tree and peeled an apple with a wicked-looking knife as he watched the group of travelers unpack their bedrolls and settle down for the evening beside the fire.

The girl had managed to find some traveling companions. Worse, they were fighters. This posed a problem. The skinny boy didn't look like he would be too much trouble, but the big guy obviously knew what he was doing. The assassin chewed

thoughtfully on a strip of apple peel, ruminating over this new situation. He'd need a new plan.

He was a patient man—patience being the primary virtue of a professional assassin—but in this case, he thought he might have been *too* patient. He had followed the girl for days now, looking for an opportunity to strike. It should have been an easy job. The girl was slight and, despite her formidable magic, hardly paid attention to what went on around her. He could have taken care of her without difficulty if she'd been alone. But that snow leopard never left her side. The damn thing never let down its guard either—not even when it slept! He cursed his luck, wishing for the thousandth time that he had done the job the first day. Instead he had hesitated, and while he debated when and where to finish the girl off, he had unintentionally followed her deep within the Witches' Forest, where he'd had to employ his assassin's skills a dozen times already just to keep himself alive. Now, with these two new fighters added to the mix, the odds shifted against him.

Things have turned messy, he thought. He hated it when things turned messy. Up until now, he'd half believed that he wouldn't need to do anything, that the Witches' Forest, with its multitude of deadly monsters, would do the job for him. But not anymore.

I can't depend on monsters to do my job for me. I must terminate her myself. With my own hands. Those were my orders.

The sharp blade of the knife dug into the white flesh of the apple. A new idea took shape in the assassin's mind.

I could sneak up behind her, while the others are busy fighting monsters . . . Yes.

He rotated the knife, neatly cleaving the apple in two. *Sneak up behind her and cut her throat . . . or strangle her. Yes.*

He stuck half the shaved apple in his mouth, chewing it ravenously as he imagined his hands encircling the graceful white

neck and squeezing. His fingers were long and slender like a musician's, but they were also strong and terribly skilled. She would be dead in seconds. Yes. *That's the best way.*

Do it before they get to the witches' mansion. That would be ideal. But a monster probably won't just pop up conveniently, much less a monster big enough to draw away the attention of the fighters and the snow leopard.

The assassin needn't have worried. There was already a monster making its way toward Agnis and the others—a monster that perfectly fit the bill. A monster so incredible, in fact, that the assassin would doubt his own eyes.

The attack would come before sunrise.

CHAPTER 7:

THREE HEADS ARE BETTER
THAN PIPE



“K ii?” Check noticed it first. He was a light sleeper. Even a faint sound would wake him, and this was the faintest of sounds. Like someone in slippers walking on palm fronds.

“Shoop . . . shoop . . . shoop . . .”

The grinia was curled up on Duan’s knees. Duan sat propped up against a tree, his short sword grasped in his hand. He was supposed to be keeping watch. Unfortunately, he had fallen asleep.

Rousing himself, Check twitched his small nose and sniffed the wind. It brought a peculiar new smell. With wide saucer eyes, the grinia rose into the air on his dragonfly wings—careful not to disturb the sleeping Duan—and took a look around the clearing.

Check had great night vision, but even without it, the clearing was lit by the full moon overhead would have been enough to light even the deep recesses of the forest. After

one lap, Check landed, sniffing the air and the grass, catching the scent again. He turned in the direction of the smell. The shuffling sound had stopped.

“Kii?” Check chirped again.

A cloud raced across the face of the moon. Darkness crept over the clearing, blotting out every bit of light. Not even Check’s superior night vision could pierce the blackness. All he could see were the dying embers of the fire, and their glow seemed very far away indeed.

The shuffling started again. “Shoop . . . shoop . . . shoop . . . shoop . . .”

“Giiiis!” Check squawked. Utterly spooked now, the baby grinia flew back to Duan as fast as his tiny wings could carry him.

“Hunh!” Duan awoke with a start as the terrified grinia slammed into him and wrapped himself around his neck, shivering.

“Danger! Giis! Something come! Check hear!” A tiny forepaw that had been close to choking Duan now pointed in the direction of the “shooping” sound.

“Easy, little guy.” Duan gently disentangled the trembling grinia and set him on his shoulder. “It’s just the wind. And try to be a little quieter, okay? You’re going to wake Ol—”

“For crying out loud, will the two of you SHUT UP?” A gruff, irritable bellow from Olba let them know that he was already awake and none too happy about it. Getting to his feet, the fighter grabbed a branch from the dying fire and stumbled sleepily toward Duan and Check. He lifted the torch in the general direction Check pointed. The three of them peered into the darkness.

At the edge of the clearing, the sputtering light of the torch illuminated something that looked like a tree trunk.

A tree trunk with toenails.

“Ssssssss . . .” The quiet rustling sound became a slow, steady hiss.

“Oh, no.” Olba’s eyes traveled upward. “You have *got* to be kidding me.”

“What?” Following Olba’s gaze, Duan looked up . . . and up . . . and his legs promptly turned to jelly. Check’s claws dug into his shoulder. He could feel the baby grinia shivering.

Though the torch revealed only the vague outline of the monster, Duan saw at once that it was big, thirty feet tall or more. It had several long, thick necks, swaying independently, terminating in what looked like . . . snake heads?

Duan counted them. *One, two, three, four* . . . There were nine heads in all, swarming and hissing above them. Nine pairs of orange eyes, glittering in the torchlight; nine wide mouths, out of which flicked long forked tongues; nine sets of big, and quite possibly venomous, fangs.

Duan felt the blood in his veins turn to ice. “What the heck is *that*?”

“That?” Olba let out a groan. “That would be a hydra.”

Duan’s mouth fell open in astonishment. *A hydra? Those really exist, too?* For a moment, gazing up at the legendary beast that stood before him, its nine heads peering through the branches of the trees, Duan was so awestruck that he forgot to be afraid.

The snake heads hissed, twisting in the air, studying the people below them. As the hissing heads veered past one another, the nine necks intertwined; their scales rubbing against each other and the surrounding leaves, making the “shoooping” sound that Check had heard earlier.

“What do we do *now*?” Duan whispered urgently.

Olba answered without hesitation, “Run.”

“Run?” Duan couldn’t believe his ears. He turned to face the fighter, but Olba was already packing up his things. “That’s it? Run?”

“Yeah, make a run for it. What, do you think we can fight this thing? Are you nuts? We can’t beat a hydra!”

Squawking, Check left Duan’s shoulder and flew off after the fighter; the baby grinia didn’t need any more convincing. But not Duan. Even as he packed up his gear, keeping one eye on the hydra, he kept on arguing with Olba. “But what if it’s just like the cyclops,” he asked, “nothing but a marionette?”

“Yeah, it probably is,” granted Olba. “Probably just another spell cast by those two witches. But so what? The damn thing’s gotta be thirty feet tall if it’s an inch! And do you see the size of those fangs? If you want to live, I suggest you run.”

“Oh jeez—*Agnis!*” In all the uproar, Duan had forgotten about the girl. Panicked, he looked around . . . and found her still curled up in her bedroll, open-mouthed and drooling.

She’s still asleep? In this racket?

“Agnis, wake up!” Duan shook the girl’s shoulders.

It took a couple of shakes, but Agnis finally opened her eyes. Scrunching up her eyebrows, she glared at Duan. “Whaddya want?!” she shouted. “Get your hands off me, you pervert!”

“Pervert?!” Duan wasn’t sure how to respond. Much to his embarrassment, he started blushing again. *Wow, she’s not a morning person, that’s for sure!* “I just—” he began.

“What is your problem?” Agnis interrupted.

“Agnis . . .”

“It’s still dark! Couldn’t you have waited ’til—”

“*Agnis!*”

“WHAT?”

Without another word, Duan pointed upward. Agnis rubbed her eyes, confused, and then looked at what Duan was trying to show her.

At that moment, the wind blew the clouds away from the moon, bathing the forest in silvery moonlight. The gargantuan beast was suddenly, clearly, sickeningly, visible. The snake heads danced in the moonlight that glistened icily off the creature's glittering scales. Folds upon folds of flesh made up the lower half of its grotesque body, and four stumpy legs carried the whole impossible load.

Agnis stared at the creature in stark, naked horror. Her eyes grew wide with fear, and she started to tremble. She looked like she might scream, but when she opened her mouth, only an involuntary squeak passed her lips. "Eek."

"Here. Take my hand." Duan reached out toward Agnis, speaking in a tone he hoped was comforting. "Come on. We're leaving."

"Hurry up!" Olba was already packed and now stood a few feet away, his long sword in hand. "You don't want me to leave you behind, do ya?"

"Giii!" Check echoed Olba's urgency. He hovered near the fighter but looked anxiously at Duan and the girl.

Agnis said nothing. She just looked suspiciously at Duan's face, then his extended hand, then back at his face again.

"Grrrr . . ." K'nock appeared at her side. Agnis grabbed her trunk and her staff. With a scornful smirk at Duan's hand, she jumped onto K'nock's back, wrapping her arms around his neck.

"See ya," she said. And the snow leopard bounded off into the forest with startling speed.

"Hey!" Duan hardly had time to blink before they were gone. "Why, that little brat!" He turned to Olba. "Did you just see what she—?"

“Kid!” Olba shouted. “Behind you!”

One of the hydra heads, hissing, shot forward.

“Look out!” yelled Olba.

Such was the urgency in Olba’s voice that Duan didn’t even pause to glance over his shoulder. He lit out, pumping his legs with all his might. But after a few steps, he realized that he wasn’t getting anywhere. Arms flailing, Duan felt himself rising into the air. “Olba! Heeeelp!” he cried out.

“Giiii! Danger!” Check shrieked, waving his tiny arms frantically as he fluttered in the air beside Olba’s head.

Duan twisted his head to see behind him and nearly fainted. One of the hydra heads had latched onto his backpack! The wide mouth stretched all the way around the pack. The creature was trying to swallow him whole, while the other eight heads swayed at the ends of their serpentine necks, broad mouths opening to join the attack.

But Duan had other ideas. Before the hydra could strike, he shrugged his way out of the backpack straps and dropped to the ground. A couple of heads darted at him, but he ducked and rolled, avoiding them.

“Friggin’ hydra!”

It was Olba! The big fighter stood between Duan and the beast, swinging his long sword as the heads struck at him, each hissing in anger. Again and again, he slashed at the thick necks, but the creature’s scales were like plated armor.

“Kid!” he shouted. “Get out of here! I don’t know how much longer I can hold it off!”

As one of the heads veered toward him, Olba swung his sword with all his strength. The heavy blade at last cut through the scales, sinking into the flesh beneath.

Now Olba had a new problem. The sword was stuck in the creature’s neck.

The remaining eight heads drew up like cobras and looked right at him, their orange eyes livid with rage.

“Crap. That’s just great.” Olba placed one foot on the wounded neck, struggling to free his sword. “Come on, damn you, come *on!*”

With a unified hiss, the heads gathered together and moved in for the kill. Olba wrenched desperately at the embedded blade.

Thwunk!

Out of nowhere, a staff smacked into one of the beast’s humongous legs.

“Leave him alone!” came a girl’s angry voice.

Duan turned to look, his heart leaping in his chest. “Agnis?”

She had come back! The girl stood a few feet away from the hydra, her face screwed up in determination, brandishing her staff. One of the heads turned toward her and hissed—she clouted it on the nose.

“Back off, slimeball!” Agnis snarled. At her side, K’nock punctuated the threat with a loud roar.

Olba groaned. “What are *you* doing here?”

“I came back to help! What else?”

“What else? You seemed pretty hell-bent on taking off a minute ago.”

“I thought you were right behind me,” Agnis explained, swatting away another hydra head. “And when you weren’t, I came back. What, you think I’d leave you to *die*? Jeez! I’m not a *coward*! I—aiiiieee!”

Agnis had been so busy defending her behavior that she had failed to notice two hydra heads winding quietly toward her until the jaw of one opened directly in her face. She stumbled backward, trying to flee—and tripped over the other head.

“Rrowrr!” As the fangs closed in, K’nock leapt forward to protect his mistress. The snow leopard snapped at the first head, trying to sink its fangs into the neck. It barely made a dent in the thing’s scaly armor, but the head retreated, turning its attention to this new threat. Unfortunately, while K’nock kept the first head busy, the second encircled the hapless girl, trapping her in its coils.

“Ahhh!” Agnis dropped her staff as the hydra tightened its hold on her and started to lift her off the ground. “Help!”

With a mighty heave, Olba wrenched his sword free of the hydra’s neck. Blood welled from the wound, and the neck drooped to the ground, where it thrashed weakly. Simultaneously, three other heads menaced him from above. He ignored them, rushing toward Agnis.

“Cover me!” he shouted to Duan.

“Who, me?” Duan already had his hands full trying to fend off the remaining two heads with only a short sword and a torch from the fire. Even so, he didn’t hesitate, but thrust himself between Olba and the pursuing heads.

Reaching the neck that held Agnis in its coils, Olba struck a series of heavy blows with his sword. With the fifth blow, he sliced clean through.

“GRAAAH!” All the hydra heads cried out at once in an eerie multitonal shriek as Agnis dropped from the severed neck. Thick red blood spurted from the stump, which crashed to the ground with an earth-shaking thump, followed seconds later by the lifeless head. For a moment the remaining heads recoiled, moaning in pain, and there was a brief respite from their incessant attacks.

“Th-thank you,” Agnis managed to choke out.

Olba pointed to the edge of the clearing with his long sword, growling through gritted teeth: “Stay. Over. There.”

“Hey!” Duan rushed forward with the torch. “Don’t forget to do this!”

He pressed the torch into the bleeding stump. The fire made a sizzling sound as it met the gushing hydra blood, but it sealed the wound. It also smelled awful.

“Oh no.” Olba coughed, waving the foul black smoke away from his face. “What on earth are you doing? This is no time for a barbecue!”

“If you don’t cauterize the stump right afterward, two necks will grow in place of the one you cut off!”

Olba gave Duan a doubtful look.

“I read it in a book,” Duan asserted confidently.

“Oh? Well. Good work then,” said Olba.

“Giiis! Danger!” cried Check suddenly, pointing a tiny forearm behind Olba.

“Huh?” Olba glanced back and saw a huge head streaking toward him. It was the same one he had injured earlier. This time, Olba was prepared. He ducked, then turned swiftly and, swinging his sword smoothly down, finished the job he had started earlier. The neck and severed head fell one after the other to the ground.

“Hey, thanks!” Olba called to Check. “Can you keep doing that? That warning thing? That was great!”

Check was visibly pleased to receive Olba’s praise. His eyes grew wide at the compliment, and he stuck out his chest with pride, saluting with his tiny forepaw. “Giis!”

Olba turned back to the bloody neck, which already was beginning to sprout two new heads. “Torch!” he called out, and Duan darted past him to cauterize the wound just in time.

Now that the initial panic had worn off, Olba began to notice that, despite its size, the hydra moved slowly. Perhaps,

with its nine—or more accurately, its seven tiny brains—it had trouble coordinating a swift, effective attack. As long as you remained calm, you could outwit the thing; in fact, you could almost predict where it would strike next.

Olba and Duan began to fall into a rhythm. Each time Olba sliced off one of the hydra's heads, Duan stepped in and applied the torch to the open wound. Check flew above them, keeping an eye on the hydra's movements and calling out warnings. They were working together like a well-oiled machine when a sudden shriek distracted them.

"It's Agnis!" cried Duan.

"Oh, man. Not again." Turning wearily, Olba saw Agnis backed up against the edge of the clearing. Directly in front of her was a hydra head, ready to gulp her down. K'nock sprang between the monster and the girl and swiped at the head with his forepaws, trying to gouge the thing's eyes out. One of his blows drew blood, and the hydra, hissing, recoiled—then lashed out, sinking its fangs into the snow leopard's flank.

"K'nock, no!" Agnis cried in an awful voice. "Please, move back! Get *back!*"

The leopard let out a roar of pain. Falling to the ground, he was quickly up again and pounced once more, landing on the back of the head. Clinging to it with his claws, K'nock sank his teeth into the creature's eye. Agnis watched the terrible struggle as the head writhed to and fro, trying to shake the big cat loose.

As K'nock wrestled with the snake head, Duan and Olba also had their hands full. Nobody noticed as one of the shadows in the forest at the edge of the clearing detached itself from the others and moved slowly, inexorably, toward Agnis.

Now—now's the time! the assassin thought as he snuck forward. *Get her now, before—*

With a roar, the hydra flung the snow leopard to the ground. As K'nock struggled to get up, it struck him again, tearing at him with its fangs.

"K'nock!" Agnis ran forward and threw herself across the snow leopard as if she could shield it with her body.

"Raaaow . . ." K'nock moaned weakly. Red blood spread across his white coat. Agnis touched it, gazing in shock at the blood on her fingertips. She raised her head and glared at the snake head that towered over her.

"Look what you've done to my snow leopard!" she shouted. "Oh boy, you're in for it now!" The girl stood up, closed her eyes, and began chanting a spell, brandishing her staff.

The assassin had seen the young witch cast one of her spells before. He knew the devastation that was about to be unleashed.

I've got to do it now, he thought, or it'll be too late! He stepped closer toward Agnis' unprotected back.

"Hey! What are you doing over there?"

At the sound of Olba's voice, the assassin jumped back into the shadows.

Olba had actually been addressing Agnis. He'd glanced over. The girl was just standing there, right in front of the hydra, with her eyes closed. Worse, three more snake heads had taken notice of her, and now advanced toward her. What the hell was she thinking?

"Are you crazy? Stand back!" Olba sprinted toward the girl, ready to tackle her and pull her away from the monster.

Jeez, I gotta take care of this, too? Olba thought. *Stupid girl!*

Agnis paid no attention to him. As she continued her chant, a fresh breeze picked up all around her. It caught a few stray leaves, spiraling them into the air, as well as lifting Agnis' hair, which curled around her face like small tongues of flame.

The silver orb at the end of her staff started to glow and crackle with energy.

Olba reached the girl and grabbed her around the waist, pulling her to the safety of the trees. He was ready to dive out of the way of the pursuing snake heads when—BOOM!

A fireball exploded out of the orb, shooting at the hydra. It erupted with such force that it knocked both Agnis and Olba to the ground; Olba had to turn his face away to avoid being singed by the heat.

The fireball surprised everyone. Check, flying nearby, narrowly avoided being roasted in midair as he veered out of its path. Duan started to run, but the force of the discharge knocked him to the ground. He felt the rush of heat on his back as the scorching ball of flames sailed over him and hit its intended target—the hydra. He crawled away as fast as he could, and when he looked up, he couldn't believe his eyes. The monster was engulfed in flames. A horrible scream came from the hydra's remaining throats as it thrashed in its death throes.

“Whooooa.”

The sight was so astounding that, for a moment, no one could think of anything to say.

Then, Olba turned to Agnis. “How the heck did you—?” But he broke off. The girl slumped over and lay motionless on the ground. “Hey,” he said, bending over her. “Are you okay?”

There was no reply.

Duan came hurrying up. “What's wrong?” he asked anxiously, looking at the girl's soot-covered face.

Check alighted on the unconscious girl's shoulder, peering at her eyes and tugging at strands of her red hair with his tiny forepaws. “Gii?” he queried. “Girl pretend?”

“Not this time,” said Olba. “I think she’s out cold.” At that, he stood up and threw Agnis over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. “Come on,” he said gruffly to Duan. “We’re leaving.”

That seemed to snap everyone out of it. K’nock, limping, followed along behind Olba, keeping close to his mistress. Duan retrieved his pack from where it had fallen on the ground, gathered up Olba’s pack and Agnis’ trunk and staff, and then caught up to Olba.

As he drew even with the big fighter, a bright blue glow issued from beneath Agnis’ tunic—the distinctive glow of an Adventurer’s Card.

“Wow,” Duan observed enviously. “She just leveled up!”

“No surprise there,” Olba replied. “Even if it was a marionette, killing a huge monster like that? You could go up a hundred points easy!”

“Yeah.” Duan gazed at the girl. Part of him wished that, all things considered, it had been his kill. But at the same time, he had to admit that such an awesome display of power was not something he could duplicate. “Did you see that Fire spell she used? Man! She’s something else, isn’t she?”

“She sure is,” Olba replied, shifting his grip on Agnis and gazing at her with an expression that made Duan feel a little jealous.

The companions trudged off into the forest, continuing their conversation, their voices getting fainter and fainter. Soon the only sound in the clearing was the low crackle of flames as the corpse of the hydra burned itself out.

Then, from the darkness of the bushes, an anguished voice cried out: “Ye-ouch!” yelled the assassin. “That burned!”

CHAPTER 8:

MIRROR MIRROR



he first thing someone would notice when walking into the room was the smell. It was overpowering and strange. It was the kind of smell that made people want to clamp a hand over their mouths, run to a window, and let in some fresh air.

Take a fine perfume, the most expensive, delicate, complex scent in the world, and dump it into a bucket with a bunch of cheap perfumes, then let it all sit for a few weeks in the hot sun, and finally throw in some mothballs for good measure, and the result might be a fragrance that *approximated* the smell in this room: stale, covered with a veneer of cheap. It permeated everything. It would have made any normal human being want to retch. Even a Hella Man-Eater—a monster that emits a peculiar scent from its glands to paralyze its prey—would have been overwhelmed by the stench.

The next thing someone would notice upon entering the room was the profusion of flowers and colorful stuffed

animals stacked from floor to ceiling. Bouquets of flowers, heaps of stuffed animals, all piled on dusty shelves. Upon closer examination, those cute stuffed toys would turn out not to be toys at all but the monsters known as *peculeses*: small, fluffy, one-eyed creatures with long, sharp claws. They had been dyed all kind of eccentric colors: shocking pink, fluorescent yellow, emerald green, electric blue.

Some of the overpowering smell came from the flowers. Some of it came from the *peculeses*. But most of it came from the two women.

“Ha ha ha ha! Oh my gosh, Ogma, you are not going to believe this! Those kids? They killed the hydra!” The woman who spoke gazed into a hand mirror. She shrieked with laughter, slapping her hand down on her dressing table so hard that the glass bottles and powder boxes cluttering its surface jumped into the air. She had pink curly hair and a voice so high-pitched it seemed to be whistling out of the top of her head.

“Can you believe it? Ha ha ha ha ha! Oh, you missed it! It was *so funny!*”

“Samra, please. Calm down. You know it gives me a headache when you laugh like that.” Ogma, who had a husky voice, sat in a rocking chair that had been fashioned out of some sort of delicate bone . . . maybe human, maybe not. On the table beside her, she had a cup of tea, and in her lap, she had a small *peculese*. She was combing it with a golden brush.

“Oh, but you just should have seen it, sister,” Samra insisted. “The look on their faces! Hee hee! Oh, I’m sorry . . .” Samra couldn’t help it. The more she tried to stifle her amusement, the more she laughed. Recalling the incident afresh, she nearly fell over at the dressing table, red-faced and gasping with laughter.

Ogma sighed. The peculese in her lap had picked up on Samra's mirth. Emitting a high-pitched whine, the monster wriggled excitedly, trying to get free.

"Darling, *please* sit still," Ogma cooed to her pet. "You'll get all matted. Sit! There's a good baby." She scratched the back of the peculese with purple fingernails as it settled back in her lap and blinked up at her with its fine lashes.

The two women were, of course, the twin witches Ogma and Samra. The room was located at the top of their mansion, deep within the Witches' Forest.

They didn't look at all the way Duan had pictured them. Being twins, they did look almost exactly alike—the same long, curly eyelashes; the same slightly pointed, tiny noses; the same flawless skin; the same full, sensuous lips. But where Samra had pink hair and wore pink lipstick and pink nail polish, Ogma had purple hair, purple lipstick, and wore purple nail polish.

They both dressed in lacy bodysuits with elaborate corsets and large, frilly skirts. They accessorized with heavy, decorative necklaces and ornamental hairpieces. The two witches looked to be around twenty, but that was just due to their magic. Their real age was known to no one—in fact, if anyone asked them how old they were, the witches themselves probably couldn't have said. Not exactly. They'd lived so long that the years had started to blur together. But they had to be at least two hundred years old, because that's how long they had lived in the mansion. Just the two of them and their pets. It would have been a lonely life for some people, but not for Ogma and Samra. They had plenty of visitors—adventurers who came looking for their treasure. The witches loved nothing more than to play cat-and-mouse with these adventurers.

"Mmmm. That tall one is dreamy, don't you think?" Samra asked, gazing into the hand mirror. The mirror's frame

was decorated with fire lizards. At the moment, the glass displayed a close-up of Olba.

"Ugh." Ogma made a face. "He's so rough. I prefer the other one."

"The skinny one? Please."

"He's *cute*!"

"He is not!"

"Is too. In fact . . . let's take a look at him again!" Ogma smiled, picking up a broad silver platter from the table next to her. The peculese jumped to the floor and scuttled away under the table, its bearlike claws clattering over the floorboards. The witch breathed over the face of the platter; the silver fogged over, revealing a close-up of Duan's face.

"Mmmm. There's that face. What a pretty boy he is!"

"You're such a cradle-robber," Samra moaned, rolling her eyes. "You always go for the pretty boys. Remember that bard?"

"Oh, don't remind me."

"You just *handed* him all that treasure! And he didn't even do anything to earn it!"

Ogma sighed wistfully. "What an airhead he turned out to be! He was pretty to look at and had a beautiful voice, but once he stopped singing and started talking, he nearly bored me to death."

"Well, that *is* a danger when they're barely out of diapers."

"Oh, shut up," Ogma teased. "Go back to looking at your caveman."

"Mmmm . . . caveman . . ." Samra made an exaggerated show of ogling the mirror again. Ogma laughed, and then turned back to her own magic looking-glass.

"But this one . . ." She peered into the clouded platter thoughtfully. "This one looks smart. What's his name again?"

"That one? Duan."

"Yes. Duan Surk. What's yours called again?"

"Olba October. Look. *Look* at him!" Samra cried. In a fit of admiration, she stuck the mirror in Ogma's face. "Isn't he *manly*? Just look at those cheekbones. Those rugged arms . . . those brooding eyes . . ."

"Those knuckles dragging on the ground . . ."

"Oh, *stop*."

Ogma glanced into Samra's mirror. "Hmmm. This Olba of yours—he's been carting around that girl for such a long time now."

The mirror showed Olba carrying Agnis, who was still unconscious. Samra scowled at the image.

"Yes." There was a glint of steel in Samra's voice. "The little witch."

"You don't think he might be developing . . . *feelings* for her, do you?"

"Oh, no. It's just that he's got a kind nature. Poor thing. He works so hard and he's so underappreciated." Samra melted a little and sighed. "I wish it were me he carried in his arms!"

"She looks familiar, that girl," Ogma said, looking back at the glass. "Isn't she *that* person's daughter?"

"Oh, probably."

"What's *she* doing here?"

Samra sniffed contemptuously. "The usual, I suppose. Revenge or something equally tiresome."

"Pah." Ogma flung the platter down on the table. Picking up an emery board, she began to file her long purple nails viciously. "If she wants to revenge herself on anyone, she should go after that woman, Ramua. She's the one who put us up to it—we're just the hired guns!"

"I told you we shouldn't have taken that job."

“Oh, whatever,” Ogma replied irritably. “Let’s make some more monsters. I’m getting bored.”

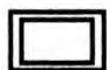
With a wicked grin, Samra stood up from the dressing table and leaned over her sister, her overflowing cleavage nearly bursting her corset. “I’ll show you mine, if you show me yours,” she said playfully.

Ogma chuckled. “I’m making a cute little cow. What about you?”

“Oh, nothing much,” Samra said, picking up two marionettes from the dressing table and hiding them behind her back so her sister couldn’t see them. “Just . . . this.”

She held up her hands. The left hand held an eagle; the right, a lion.

The two sisters looked at each other and burst into a fit of giggles.



Meanwhile, back in the forest . . .

The heroes had been walking since before sunrise. Olba carried the still-unconscious Agnis in his arms. K’nock followed, still limping even though Check had cast a Heal spell on the snow leopard earlier. Now, as a reward, the big cat permitted the baby grinia to perch on his furry back. Duan, who carried Olba’s backpack and the girl’s trunk in addition to his own knapsack, trailed behind. After trudging through the forest all morning, they had come across what looked like a long-overgrown path. Great paving stones jutted out of the ground here and there, uprooted and overturned in places, displaced by clusters of crabgrass that had grown up between them.

Olba paused to check the map. “This path seems to be heading in the right direction,” he said.

“Does that mean we’re getting close?” Duan looked at the fighter hopefully, not least of all because he really, really wanted to put down all the baggage. Olba’s frying pan had been banging against the back of his knees for the last few hours.

“It seems like it,” Olba answered. “Is it getting hot, or is it just me?”

Duan nodded. Ever since they’d discovered the path, the climate had changed. Gone was the crisp, bracing air of a September morning. In its place was an oppressive humidity. The air seemed to enclose them like an invisible shroud, sticking to their faces and clothes.

Olba shifted the unconscious girl in his arms to one side and, with his free hand, pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped his brow.

“She’s been out for a while,” Duan observed.

“Yeah, I wish she’d—”

Suddenly, Olba fell silent.

“What is it?”

“Shh!” Olba silenced him abruptly. He gazed into the trees, listening intently. Check pricked up his ears as well. Leaping from the snow leopard’s back, the grinia rose into the air, zipping to and fro, trying to see deeper into the forest.

All Duan could hear was the rustling of trees in the wind. “Is something wrong?” he whispered after a moment.

Olba sighed, stuffing the handkerchief back into his pocket. “I keep getting the feeling that someone’s watching us.”

“You think we’re being followed?”

“Who knows?” Olba shifted the girl’s weight again. “Man, I just wish Sleeping Beauty here would wake up already. Jeez, she’s heavier than she looks!”

“Yeah, so’s this trunk of hers,” Duan grumbled, shifting the burden on his back; he decided not to mention the fact that

Olba's pack weighed twice as much as the trunk and his own knapsack put together. He looked at Agnis, whose head rested on Olba's shoulder. It was past noon and she still looked deathly pale. Smudges of soot clung to her forehead and cheeks.

"Do you think she'll be okay?" Duan asked. "She seems to be sick or something, and she's been out even longer than she was the last time."

"Well, this is just a theory." Olba resumed walking as he spoke, and Duan followed. "I think she gets tired out from using magic. I mean, that was a *huge* spell she cast back there. Really high-level. But I checked her card after it flashed, and get this—she only leveled up to a four!"

"*Four?*" Duan looked again at the sleeping girl. "That's not much more advanced than I am!"

"Right! And she cast such a powerful spell. Her magical ability is very high. That's obvious. But her adventurer level is only four. Something's not right with this picture."

"So . . ." Duan puzzled it out. "Why didn't she just cast a lower-level magic spell? Something that would, you know, do the trick but not take so much out of her."

"You remember when she fainted the other day?" Olba glanced at Duan.

"Yeah?"

"Remember what happened right before that?"

The light went on in Duan's head. "The scorched clearing . . ."

"Exactly." Olba trudged onward. "I think she cast the same damn Fire spell."

"And fainted."

"Yup."

"Huh," Duan snorted. "Some witch! She starts fires and then faints. Oh, that's *real* useful!"

At that, Agnis' eyes flew wide open. "Useful enough to save your sorry butts from that hydra," she said sarcastically, pulling on Olba's ponytail to emphasize her words. "You guys could show a little more *respect*."

Duan's heart rose in his chest. She was awake! "Agnis! Thank goodness you're all right!"

Olba was less delighted. "Oh, you're awake now? Lovely. Here, if you're so powerful . . ." He dumped Agnis unceremoniously onto the ground. "Start walking, sweetheart."

"Hey!" Agnis sat on the ground, pouting. She blew a lank piece of hair out of her eyes and glared up at Olba. "That hurt!" she complained. "What did you have to go and do that for? After all I did for you, too. Ow."

She rubbed her aching tailbone as K'nock sidled up next to her with a low growl. Check fluttered away from the snow leopard and took up his accustomed perch on Duan's shoulder.

"You've got some nerve!" Olba glowered at the girl. "I've been carrying you around for the better part of two days, your own personal servant whenever you decide it's time for a beauty nap, and do I get so much as a word of thanks? Somebody needs to teach you some manners, kid."

"I'm not a kid!" Agnis pushed out her lower lip defiantly. "I'm sixteen," she informed the fighter.

"Hey, really?" interjected Duan. "What a coincidence. I'm sixteen too." He extended his hand with a friendly smile. "Come on, I'll help you up."

Agnis glared at him. "I can do it myself, thanks," she declared icily. "I certainly don't need any help from *you*. You weren't even any use when it came to defeating the hydra!"

"That's unfair!" Duan yelled, flushed. "Between Olba, Check, and me, we had the situation under control! We had

five heads cut off before you decided to let loose with your fireball—and *faint!*” He couldn’t help himself from getting that last dig in.

Agnis got up and dusted herself off, looking entirely bored. “Big deal. You had a torch. Woo-hoo. Big man with a torch—I’m so impressed.”

“At least I don’t *pass out* when I use it.”

“Can we move along?” Olba said. “Or do I have to give you two a time-out?”

“Stop treating me like a child!” Agnis shouted, stamping her foot. “I can’t believe you guys! I defeated that hydra single-handedly and this is what I get? A lot of moaning and complaining? I’d like to see any one of you do—”

“Listen,” said Duan, interrupting her. “Do you have any idea what you almost did back there?”

“Besides roast that hydra, you mean?”

“That Fire spell of yours nearly roasted us *all*. Check barely made it out in time. Look at him!”

He showed Agnis the top of Check’s head. The grinia’s beautiful golden crest was badly singed. The sight seemed to take some of the wind out of Agnis’ sails. For a moment she just stared at Check, looking genuinely remorseful, and kept quiet as Duan continued.

“You didn’t warn us at all, so we had no time to duck.” Duan looked at her very seriously. “Olba was trying to save you and you nearly fried him. You could have killed us all with that spell of yours. Besides, you could hurt *yourself* that way! Starting fires and then passing out cold—that’s not something you really want to go around doing.”

“I-I’m sorry. Really. I didn’t know . . .” Dropping all the arrogance from her manner, Agnis apologized so sincerely that Duan wasn’t sure how to respond.

"It's all right. I mean . . . you know." He fumbled for something comforting to say. "Just be a little more careful. We were worried about you." He smiled sympathetically.

"Thanks." Agnis gave him a grateful smile. Duan felt woozy.

Oh my gosh, she's looking at me! She's smiling at me! What do I say NOW?

"Yeah, uh . . . sure. You're welcome." He looked away, hoping he wouldn't start blushing again, and cast around desperately for a change of subject. "And uh, anyway—hey! Check your Adventurer's Card. I think you leveled up."

"Oh yeah?" Agnis pulled out the card that hung around her neck. "Hey, you're right! Level 4!" She did some quick calculations in her head. "Let's see, I was four hundred seventy points before, so that hydra was . . . *a measly fifty points?*"

"Another damn puppet!" Olba snarled.

"Puppet?" Agnis echoed.

"Well, you know how we're in the Witches' Forest, right?" said Duan.

Agnis nodded, listening intently. Duan tried to meet her gaze, but the mere sight of her violet eyes focusing on him with such disconcerting attention made his heart start beating uncontrollably. He began stammering.

"Well, see . . . there's these puppets . . . that the witches . . . well, they turn into monsters . . . I mean, the puppets turn into monsters, not the witches . . . and then the monsters attack . . ."

Oh man, I sound like a total dweeb! She's going to think I'm crazy!

As they walked on, Duan somehow managed to relate the story of how he and Olba had encountered the cyclops and discovered that it was a puppet sent by the witches. He told Agnis about the enchantment that made travelers lose their

way in the forest (carefully omitting any reference to his own firsthand experience of the curse). As Duan struggled with his words, trying to make himself sound marginally impressive, Olba observed knowingly, watching with a bemused grin.

Agnis listened thoughtfully, nodding periodically, until he finished. “Now I see why we’ve been coming across such a boatload of monsters ever since we arrived in this forest. Do you think—was I lost, too?”

“I suppose you were.”

“What an idiot I’ve been.” Agnis looked embarrassed. “Oh my gosh—I can’t believe I thought that was a *real* hydra!”

“Well, we all did.” Duan tried to cheer her up. “And hey, look on the bright side—you leveled up, right?”

Agnis’ eyes twinkled with a bit of her old spirit. “Yeah,” she said, smiling. “I guess I did, didn’t I?”

Duan was acutely aware of the Adventurer’s Card hanging around his neck. He didn’t even have to look at it. He knew that it was, as always, stuck firmly on Level 2. He sighed. *How come I’m the only one who never seems to gain any experience points around here?*

He tried to comfort himself with the thought that he was, at least, on a quest, and fighting monsters. *That’s still progress compared to how things were before. Like I told Agnis, you’ve got to look on the bright side—it beats swatting slimes in the backyard.*

At least here, I’m bound to level up sooner or late. Yeah. It’s gotta happen! There will be plenty more chances. Sure.

But for some reason, Duan didn’t find his inner pep talk all that convincing. He trudged along, deep in thought, when everything went haywire. Suddenly Olba shouted and K’nock leapt onto his mistress, pushing her down; as she fell, Agnis grabbed hold of Duan, pulling him down with her.

“Giaaa! Danger, danger! Giiiiis!” Check shouted as he flew around frantically.

“Stay down!” ordered Olba before disappearing into the forest. Check, obediently, flew to the ground and, hopping over to Duan, huddled with him under the fighter’s backpack.

“Great. I’ll never get this cape clean now.”

Duan glanced at Agnis. She lay on the ground a few inches away, half covered by the snow leopard. She looked with dismay at the dirt smeared all over her.

“How many times do I have to fall down today?” she continued unhappily.

Olba returned. “Damn it. He got away.”

“What was *that* all about?” Agnis sat up and began to brush herself off. She opened her mouth and was about to continue her barrage of complaints when Olba thrust something in her face.

“*This*,” he said. It was an arrow tipped with a bluish metal. He pointed to a nearby tree. A second arrow protruded from the trunk, still quivering. The tree was right next to where Agnis had been standing a moment before. Agnis looked at the first arrow, then at the second, and swallowed hard.

“Do you know what this is?” Olba was infuriated. “And be careful with that arrow—the tip may be poisoned.”

Agnis had taken the arrow in her hand and was examining it.

“The tip is made from a metal called dordo,” she said quietly. “It’s a special alloy made in Fiana.”

“This guy—the one who’s trying to kill you. Do you know who he is?”

She swallowed. “No, not at all. But I have a good idea *what* he might be.”

Olba rolled his eyes. “I *knew* we were being followed. I just didn’t dream it was an assassin!”

“Check, keep an eye out in case that guy comes back,” Duan ordered the grinia.

“Giis!” Check flew up into the air, hovering vigilantly over the group.

Olba turned his attention back to the girl. “Okay, sweetheart, start talking. Who is this guy and what did you do to deserve getting shot at with such deadly weapons? And while we’re at it, who are *you*? You’re from Fiana, I take it?”

Agnis looked like she might cry.

“Those tears won’t work on me,” Olba continued. “Speak up. I’m team leader and that’s an order. You’re going to tell us who you are, what you’re doing here, and why this guy’s after you. And use small words, so we can understand. Otherwise you’re gone—bye-bye.”

Agnis opened her mouth, and for a moment it looked as if she might make a sarcastic remark. Instead, she sighed and hung her head. “Okay,” she said. “I’ll tell you. But it’s a long story.”

Olba seemed to relax a little. “Long stories are the best kind.” He patted the girl on the shoulder. “Come on, you must be starving. I know I am. We’ll take a lunch break and listen to your story. Duan makes a mean mushroom frittata.”

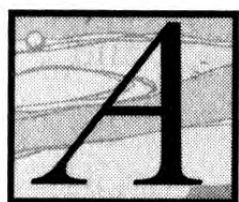
Agnis looked up, surprised. The fighter smiled at her with amusement. Despite his sharp words earlier, he seemed energized, as if he relished the seriousness of their situation.

Agnis smiled back at him and laughed. “Okay.” As Olba strode over to the side of the path, preparing to build a fire, Agnis looked over at Duan.

“Well?” she said. “Don’t just stand there. Help me up!”

CHAPTER 9:

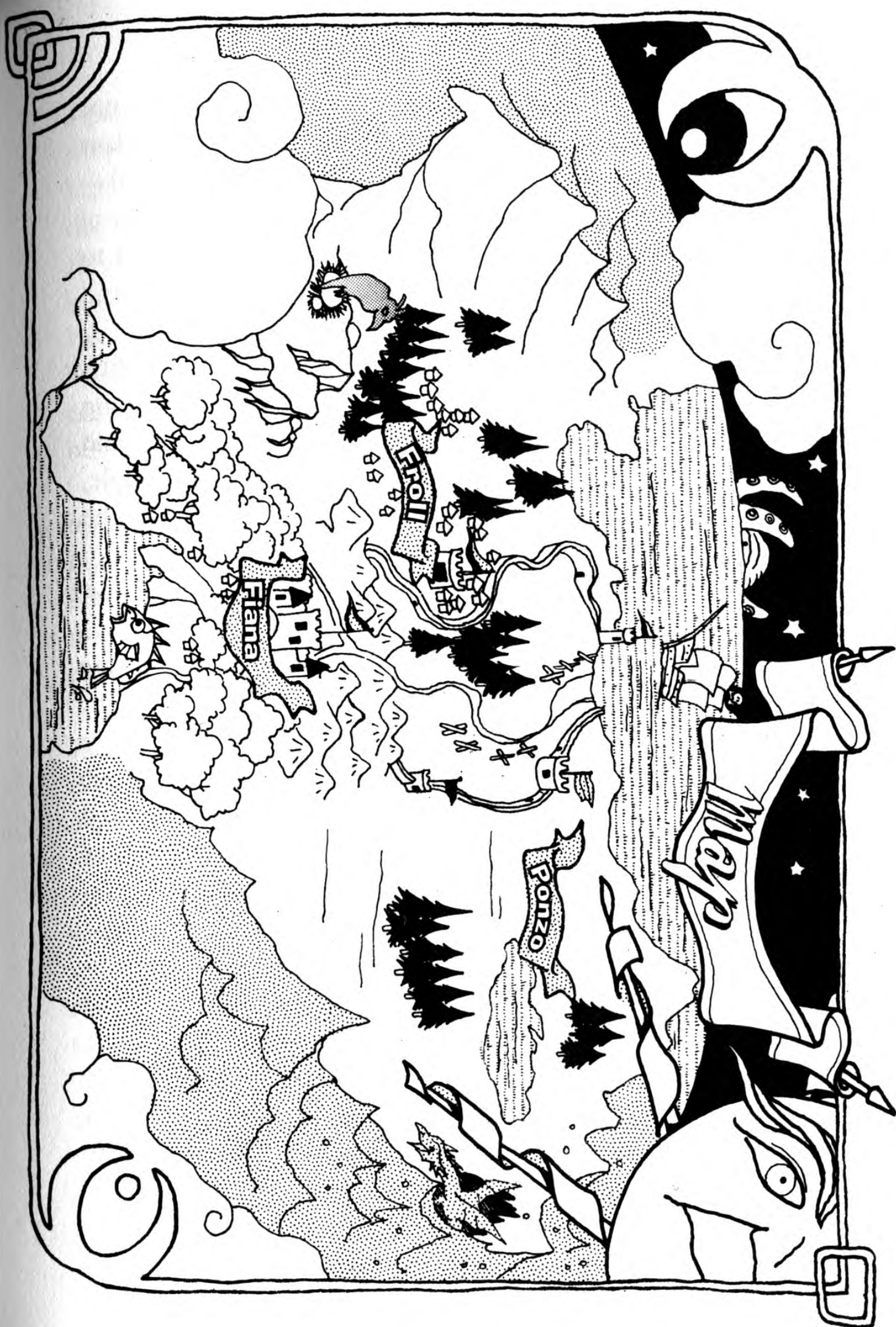
A TALE OF TWO PALACES



Agnis was born sixteen years ago in the small kingdom of Fiana. It was a tiny country in the south, nestled between the borders of Froll and Ponzo. Situated as it was, on the coastline where the Selina river rushed into the sea, it has always been a thriving port with an abundance of fish and a long and successful history of trade with both its neighboring countries.

Most people were familiar, from school, with the classic ode “The Rosy Cliffs of Fiana,” which celebrated the country’s exquisite coastline. Blessed with breathtaking scenery and white sandy beaches, Fiana not only inspired whole schools of poetry but also became a prime tourist destination, particularly for honeymooning couples intent on gazing at the gentle sunsets on the beach, strolling through the romantic port towns, or touring the rolling hills of the surrounding countryside.

Though the war between Froll and Ponzo took its toll on tourism, Fiana had been left otherwise unaffected by it. Fiana



had nonaggression treaties with both countries; it had not violated its neutrality, so it was safe from invasion. Abundant natural resources—the bounteous waters and rich, fertile soil—ensured that Fiana would remain prosperous even in times of conflict. So, for the most part, its citizens had continued to lead peaceful, unperturbed lives even as the war raged around them.

Yet despite the country's relative wealth and stability, its king was deeply troubled. King Palea IV had everything a monarch could ask for: a peaceful domain, a loving and beautiful family, immense wealth, the adoration of his people, and good relations with his neighbors. But at the time that he met Agnis' mother, he was desperately unhappy.

Yes, the king of Fiana was Agnis' father. Agnis didn't just *act* like a princess, she really *was* one.

The young king could not have told anyone what was wrong. He only knew that the placid days of his rule brought him no joy and passed in a dull haze. Nothing inspired any aspirations in his heart. He couldn't summon up real emotion about anything: not happiness, not anger, not even sadness or suffering. His wife, Queen Ramua, was a beautiful, elegant woman. She had borne him three beautiful children, two daughters and a son. In the ten years of their marriage, a cross word had never passed between them. Yet when Palea looked at his wife, he felt no strong affection for her. It wasn't that he disliked her. He respected her. She was a very good queen. A trifle remote perhaps, a bit aloof, but those were not altogether inadmirable qualities in a queen. He was satisfied with her in every way. But did he love her? What exactly did he feel for her? He couldn't say.

It was the same with his three children. They were charming, bright, lively children: attractive, smart, everything

a parent could pray for. They adored their father. Yet when they would climb into his lap, shouting, laughing, telling him of their latest adventures, even though he went through the motions of listening, he really wasn't. He cared nothing about what they were saying—or even about them. And the knowledge that he felt this way about his own children tore Palea apart. Or, rather, it *would* have torn him apart had he been able to feel something, anything. But since he couldn't, it caused him a kind of hollow, aching pain in the place where he believed his heart should have been.

He could find no fault with his life. He had been raised in a warm, loving environment. He hadn't any real concerns. His subjects were loyal, his servants devoted and trustworthy. Not a single thought of treachery would have ever entered their minds. They loved their country and their king with a passion that Palea could only envy.

He was thirty-two, in the prime of life, and yet he had no ambitions; he felt as dry and lifeless as a twisted, dead tree in the midst of a flowering garden. He wondered if he was better off dead. Then, suddenly, everything changed.

The king, as was his custom in the morning, had gone hunting in the forest. He'd sent his attendants away and was busy flushing out quail in the bushes when a sudden thunderstorm caught him by surprise. With a great boom, the sky opened up and lightning and torrential rain poured down on Palea and his horse.

Dismounting, the king pulled his coat over his head and was leading his horse toward cover when a tremendous thunderclap frightened the animal. It reared up, eyes rolling, and wrenched the reins from the king's hand in its haste to escape. Palea watched helplessly as the horse ran off into the trees and disappeared. Now he was alone and stranded.

He shivered, pulling his drenched coat around him, and huddled in the shelter of a large tree. The rain pelted down harder and harder; he could barely see a foot in front of him. Another terrible clap of thunder sounded, and a huge bolt of lightning forked across the sky. The heart of the storm passed directly overhead. *Standing near trees in thunderstorms is dangerous, isn't it?* he thought, but it was merely an observation, an abstraction. He could have been killed there. The idea had a certain amount of unreality to it, so he just stayed where he was, waiting for whatever would come. Perhaps that was why what happened next felt like a waking dream.

After a few moments, Palea saw a soft, warm light in the trees beyond him. At first, he thought a lightning bolt had set some underbrush ablaze. But no, the light moved slowly and steadily. In fact, it came right toward him!

Palea squinted into the rain and could scarcely believe what he saw.

A ball of flame was gliding across the ground. A cloud of steam rose up around it as it moved, but the grass and leaves it passed over remained unscathed. Standing at the center of the ball of raging flame was a young woman. She too was untouched by the fire, although completely enveloped in it. As she advanced, the bright flames followed her steps with a gentle buoyancy. The pelting raindrops hit the fireball with a hiss, evaporating immediately; inside the sphere, everything appeared bathed in golden light. Outside, the violent rainstorm and the lightning seemed like another world, a dream away.

Palea stared in mute amazement as the woman came nearer and nearer. Suddenly, a few feet away from him, she hesitated. The fireball hovered around her. It appeared that the woman hadn't seen him standing there until just now; she looked a bit embarrassed, as though she had been caught

doing something she shouldn't have. She paused for a moment, looking at the rain-drenched man huddled and shivering under the tree, and smiled at him.

Slowly, she raised one hand. Palea felt a puff of something warm brush against his cheek. Then his entire body was surrounded by pleasant, balmy air. He felt his clothes beginning to dry out as the blood returned to his cold-numbed body. The feeling returned to his hands and feet, and he realized how close he had been to freezing to death.

"Ahhh . . ." He closed his eyes and when he opened them, he saw a wall of molten, golden light; he could feel its heat radiating over him. He realized he stood *within* the ball of flame itself. From inside, the flames undulated and flickered like rivers of glowing light. They didn't seem like burning licks of a fire at all. Marveling at the wall of flame, he reached out to touch it—and felt a hand grasp his wrist, pulling it back.

He turned.

There, standing so close to him that he could feel her breath against his face, was the woman. She was slender and ethereal, with glossy red hair and eyes like hot coals. Palea couldn't help staring at her; the woman grew uneasy at his gaze and lowered her eyes shyly. She was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen.

Palea was stunned. As though he had been struck by the very lightning he had been so afraid of, he fell in love with her, just like that.

The woman was called Rubis. At the time, she was twenty-two years old, ten years younger than Palea. She had inherited some elf blood and was an Elementaller by birth. This delighted her parents, who quickly began saving for her tuition in adventuring, sacrificing everything so Rubis could have the very best training. They were both adventurers themselves,

and it was their dream that their children would become adventurers as well. In fact, all of Rubis' siblings were fighters. But it was Rubis on whom they pinned their highest hopes. Elementallers were very rare, and her parents knew that such an exceptional skill would be much in demand.

The only problem was that Rubis didn't have much of a taste for battle. For someone who could control the spirit of fire, she was hopelessly even-tempered and pleasant. It was difficult to provoke her at all, and she hated to hurt anyone or anything, even the tiniest bug on the ground. She tried to hone her battle skills—she didn't want to disappoint her parents. But if she joined a party of fighters, it wasn't long before she was branded as totally useless. She'd be left on the sidelines while the others leapt into the fray. She couldn't help herself—it wasn't in her personality to fight. She knew that she disappointed her family, and this mortified her.

She felt like the most useless Elementaller in the world; at the time Palea met her, she was about to go home and break the news to her parents that she'd reached the end of her road as an adventurer. The rainstorm had started, and to cheer herself up, she went for a walk in the rain. It was the only time she was sure she could play with her gift and enjoy it, without setting anything on fire. That was how she'd run into Palea.

When the king invited her back to his castle, she accepted joyfully. He set up an entire wing for her in his summer palace by the shore, and though the servants looked upon her a bit suspiciously at first, it never occurred to Rubis to ask them why Palea was away so often. She didn't even know of Ramua's existence for almost a year. By then, it was too late. She was deeply in love with him. And she was carrying his child.

On the second day of June, Sigress Year 367, Rubis gave birth to a beautiful baby girl. They named her Agnis. On

the day of her birth, Palea was beside himself with emotion, running up and down the halls of the summer castle, calling on midwives, bringing hot towels, standing in the doorway anxiously, the very picture of an expectant father. He had not displayed such deep emotion when his children by his legal wife, Ramua, were born. But he adored Agnis, who—apart from her violet eyes, which she had inherited from him—was the spitting image of Rubis.

He spent every spare moment he could with his new baby and her mother, sometimes even whole days. He doted on the child, and as she grew, he brought her presents from faraway lands, including a rare snow leopard cub, which he named K'nock. The name meant "new hope," and it was an apt description for what Agnis and her mother meant to the king.

Their presence brought a joy to his life that he had never known. It grounded him, inspired him, rekindling long-forgotten dreams and ambitions. The revitalized king took a renewed interest in government. In his dealings and decisions, he became creative, fair, and passionate. The dull days of the past had been blown away like a dark cloud, a bad dream.

Naturally, the people of Fiana were overjoyed to see their transformed king, and they praised Rubis as the reason for the change. Many preferred her kind smile and warm manner to the haughty beauty of Ramua, and whispers began at the court and in the town square that Rubis was better suited to take the throne beside the king.

These could only have been painful times for Ramua. When she first heard news of the king's young, red-haired mistress, she had shown no emotion. All kings had mistresses, after all, and she endured the infidelity with regal pride. But as the popularity of Rubis throughout the kingdom grew and grew, so did Ramua's hate. The noble lines of her face became

hardened and her eyes set in a stony gaze that belied the turmoil tearing at her heart. The only joy left to her was watching her children grow up. That, and the knowledge that one of them would succeed Palea as the ruler of Fiana.

Then, on Agnis' sixteenth birthday, disaster struck.

CHAPTER 10:

WHY THE CAGED BIRD CRIES



In Fiana, the coming-of-age celebrations were held when boys turned eighteen and girls turned sixteen. And on the advent of Agnis' sixteenth birthday, the kingdom saw a celebration such as it had never seen before.

The day was declared a national holiday. In every town, festivals in honor of the princess were held, boasting fireworks, jugglers, stilt-walkers, singing, dancing, and the shooting of cannons. But in the capital city, the greatest gala of all took place.

From far and wide, noblemen and visiting royalty came to celebrate the birthday of the king's favorite daughter. The townspeople gasped in wonder as the exotic procession of guests wound its way through the town, brightly colored standards fluttering in the breeze. From high atop the castle walls, trumpets blared a royal welcome. The ambassador of Froll arrived on a silk palanquin carried on the shoulders of

five magically tamed cyclopes while his servants strewed rose petals in his path. Not to be outdone, the king of Ponzo sent an envoy of delegates and an entire battalion of elephants.

From atop the pachyderms, the delegates threw candies and trinkets to the assembled spectators; their entourage followed in golden carriages drawn by painted horses. Dukes, duchesses, consorts, concubines, clowns, drummers, fire-eaters—all paraded down the streets of the town to great fanfare and spectacle, delighting the gaping crowd. They made their way to the king's banquet hall, where they presented Agnis with the most marvelous gifts imaginable: a sheer silk cloth woven by seven maidens; a hair ornament made from white gold brought in from a faraway land; a perfume distilled from the intoxicating Idaneas Jasmine flower, which only blooms once a year, at midnight, in the remote mountains of Ponzo.

But nothing in the piles magnificent treasure could compare to the translucent beauty of Agnis. She had grown into a graceful, lovely young woman. Like her mother, she had bountiful red hair and smooth, porcelain skin; a quick wit; and sparkling eyes. She sat at the head of the table and nodded graciously as each of the visiting dignitaries came forward, presented their gifts, and paid their respects.

"Such an admirable young lady," murmured one foreign prince, as he knelt and kissed the princess's hand. "Your kingdom will certainly be in good hands with such a lovely successor, your majesty!"

The court, which until that moment had been abuzz with lively chatter, froze at the prince's words. All eyes were surreptitiously on the king's other children—his legitimate children, his two daughters and his son, the royal heir—who sat right there at the table, looking a bit sullen.

In the terrible silence, the foreign prince—his name was Grith—looked around awkwardly. Prince Grith knew he had committed a faux pas but wasn't sure what it was. He had assumed, perhaps naturally, that such a lavish celebration would be reserved for the heir to the royal throne, not the illegitimate child of the king's mistress.

A quick-witted courtier saved the situation. "Oh, ha ha ha! What a marvelous joke Prince Grith has just made!" he shouted and continued laughing, trying to smooth things over.

"Oh yes, ha ha ha, a joke!" the other courtiers chimed in, fluttering ornate fans in front of their faces and twittering like birds as they glanced sideways at Queen Ramua to gauge her reaction.

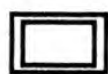
No sign of emotion passed over the queen's pale face; her cold smile never wavered.

The king, in the meantime, nodded to Prince Grith and motioned for him to rise. "You're absolutely correct," he remarked in a relaxed voice, as though thinking aloud. "The choice of successor is one of the most important decisions a monarch can make. The fate of the kingdom and its people depends upon it. If he is wise, a ruler will base his choice not on bloodlines, or gender, but on merit. Yes, the person with the most wisdom should rule the land."

He spoke the words quietly, but their impact was not lost on the courtiers. "How lucky we are to have such a wise king," they murmured appreciatively while continuing to glance apprehensively toward the queen.

Ramua gazed stonily into the distance, as though she had not heard a word.

But the king's impromptu speech was about to trigger a landslide of tragedy.



For seven days and nights, the celebration continued, until no one within the castle walls could tell which day it was, or even whether it was day or night. At last, on the morning of the eighth day, the castle was silent. Everyone was asleep. Some of the guests had straggled off; the remaining ones were in bed. Even in the kitchen, the exhausted servants leaned against one another, snoring.

It was late in the morning. In the royal apartments, all was quiet. Agnis, the young princess, was also asleep. Thoroughly worn out, she had fallen into her bed the night before while still wearing her ball gown. She and her mother were supposed to be heading back for the summer palace later that afternoon, but she had no plans to get up sooner than necessary. K'nock, however, had plans of his own. The snow leopard started tugging at her gown with his teeth, gently at first, then more urgently.

Finally, Agnis woke up. "Uggh . . . K'nock! Please, just a little longer," she said, pulling the soft feather blanket up over her head.

This time, K'nock grabbed the edge of the blanket with his teeth, tugging it off the bed. Agnis opened one eye. "What is *wrong* with you, K'nock?"

It only took a brief look into K'nock's eyes for Agnis to realize that there was something seriously, terribly wrong.

Still in her gown from the night before, she dashed out of the room. In the hallway, ladies-in-waiting ran about frantically, darting back and forth, whispering anxiously to one another. When they caught sight of Agnis, they averted their eyes and hurried away, scattering in every direction. The princess spotted a maid she was friendly with and grabbed her by the arm.

“Maira! What’s wrong?” she asked. “What’s going on?”

“I-I’m sorry, my lady, I don’t know anything.” The maid wouldn’t look her in the eyes.

“What is it?” Agnis demanded, panic rising in her throat. “Maira—my father! Is he all right? Has something happened to the king? Answer me!”

“Oh, Princess . . .” With that, the maid’s eyes filled with pity. “Princess, you poor thing.”

Pulling away, the maid ran off, sobbing. Watching her go, Agnis felt her heart beating rapidly, like an alarm bell. Something had happened to her father, she was sure of it—something awful! She knew she wasn’t going to get any information out of the others maids, so she decided to ask her mother.

But when she got to her mother’s room, her heart stopped. A group of worried-looking people stood in the doorway. As Agnis approached, she felt an awful sickness in the pit of her stomach. They tried to block her way, but Agnis would have none of it. “Let me through!” she shouted, wriggling out of their grasp, running into the room. “I want to see my—”

Her mother was not there. It was her father, sitting alone in the chair that her mother usually occupied. Turning to Agnis, his face betrayed a deep sadness—he seemed to have aged ten years overnight. The room was in disarray. Half-filled wine goblets sat on the table, and the curtains were open and billowing. But in her relief to see her father, Agnis barely noticed.

“Father!” she ran to him and, falling to her knees, embraced him. “I thought something had happened to you. What’s going on? Where’s Mother?”

The king said nothing. He simply lifted his arm and pointed toward the table, where a golden birdcage sat. The

cage had been one of Agnis' birthday presents, from Queen Ramua, of all people. Agnis had thought it strange at the time that the cage had been empty, but it was empty no longer. Sitting on the golden perch within was a single small bird with gorgeous red plumage. Not understanding, Agnis stood up and went over to the cage, examining the bird. It gazed back at her with the saddest look a bird could have and let out a sorrowful chirp.

"I-I don't understand." Agnis turned back to her father. "What does a bird have to do with Mother?"

"Agnis," her father said in a halting voice, "I hardly know how to tell you this. I saw what happened with my own eyes and I don't believe it myself. But there were other witnesses, and they will confirm that what I am about to tell you is the truth. It's unbelievable. But you *have* to believe me." Her father raised his sad eyes to meet hers. "Agnis, the bird in the cage is your mother."

Agnis blinked. That bird? *Her mother?* She stifled an urge to laugh or scream. The words together didn't make any sense. It was madness, total madness. But there was the bird, with feathers as red as her mother's hair, and her mother was nowhere to be seen. How could someone be transformed into a bird? And not just someone—*her mother?*

As Agnis stood there, not knowing how to respond, her father spoke again, his voice weary, the words dropping from his lips like lead weights, heavy with sorrow. "It all happened last night. In this room. Rubis and I were having a nightcap with Prince Grith and a few of his friends when, all of a sudden, the balcony door crashed open."

Agnis glanced at the balcony. The glass-paned doors were still open from the night before, and the white curtains billowed eerily into the room at that moment.

"When we looked to see what it was," the king continued, "we saw two young women standing on the balcony. One woman had pink curly hair, the other woman had purple hair. They gave off a hideously pungent smell, and they wore gaudy clothes covered in frills and lace. At first, I thought they were friends of the prince's, or party guests who'd lost their way. I'm not sure what I thought. They were standing right there!" As he looked at the balcony, conjuring the scene in his mind, Palea began to shake violently, overcome by helplessness and anger. His daughter ran to his side, embracing him, trying to soothe his agitation.

"Father, who were they?"

"I asked them that. They started laughing—horrible, high-pitched laughter." He shuddered. "I can still hear it! 'We're the twin witches Ogma and Samra,' they said, speaking almost in a single voice."

Agnis felt her blood run cold. Ogma and Samra . . . Hadn't she heard of them? Maybe she had read about them in a book somewhere.

Palea continued his story.

"They started laughing hysterically, as if they had just told an enormous joke that only they found funny. Then they calmed down and they . . . floated . . . through the doorway. They started waltzing with each other, this parody of a waltz, really. There was music coming up from downstairs, and there they were, waltzing around the room. Then they started dancing all around us, making faces at us. It was . . . strange. Disturbing. None of us could do anything but watch; it was just so extraordinary. We weren't sure what was happening.

"Then one of them—the purple-haired one—sidled up to me and poked me in the chest, quite unceremoniously. 'So you're the king,' she said. 'Palea IV. Well, aren't you a

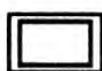
dreamboat? I can see why you're so popular.' And then she leered at me and started stroking my face with her long, purple fingernails. I found it quite unnerving.

"And then the other one started in on Prince Grith. 'Look, Ogma, this one's quite handsome too,' she said. She had snuck up behind him and started tickling him. Can you imagine? Tickling a prince!

"Of course he was outraged. 'Unhand me,' he said, 'you odiferous woman.' And he slapped her hand away. That made her furious. She hitched up her skirts and started screaming at him. 'Who do you think you are, you foolish prince'? And so forth. Grith was a trifle inebriated, and he's a proud man to begin with, so they commenced a shouting match. Everything was in an uproar. Someone called the guards, and one of Grith's companions went for his sword; it was unbearable. The pink-haired witch just kept shouting at everyone. Her face had been pretty, but it became contorted as she cursed us all. 'You nobles think you're so high and mighty, but you can't even tie your shoes by yourselves. You're nothing but parasites living off the poor.' That sort of thing. She seemed to really hate us.

"The other witch calmed her down. 'Come on Samra,' she said, 'let's get this over with before the guards get here.' No one knew what she was talking about. But the purple-haired one lifted her finger and pointed at Rubis—your mother. And Rubis began floating up into the air.

"I tried to pull her down," the king continued, his eyes filling with tears. "I tried to grab her, but she kept floating higher, as if there was some force pulling her away from me—a force stronger than me. Soon her head brushed the ceiling. I couldn't reach her. Damn these high ceilings! She seemed totally paralyzed; she didn't move so much as a finger the whole time. But she kept calling out to me. 'Help! Help, Palea!'"



With that, the king broke down sobbing, unable to go on. He couldn't bring himself to tell his daughter the rest of the woeful tale.

The truth was that when Palea saw his true love floating near the ceiling, helpless and frozen, something inside of him snapped. He grabbed the purple-haired witch by her throat, shaking her like a dog shakes a rag in its teeth.

"Stop! Make it stop! What the hell are you trying to do?" he screamed. "Bring her back to the ground NOW!"

The witch just laughed. "Oh look, Samra, I'm being strangled!" she said as the king's fingers tightened around her neck. She pretended to gasp for breath, contorting her features hideously, although it was plain that Palea's efforts had no effect. "Help! Help! I can't breathe! Ha ha ha!"

Disgusted, Palea threw her to the ground, where she laughed harder than ever.

"Oh, Ogma, that's *so* distasteful." The pink-haired witch rolled her eyes. "This is no time to joke around. We're playing with *fire* here." She nodded toward the trapped Rubis.

"Oh. Right." Ogma stood up and dusted herself off. "All right, enough fun. Let's get down to business. *Ruari, shigotch, irua, rishy, sayal, arishi, kurumi . . .*"

The witch croaked out the strange words in her hoarse, gravelly voice and threw a handful of purple powder at the floating Rubis.

In horror, the king lunged for the witch, but the same force that had pulled his beloved mistress upward to the ceiling seemed to push him downward, to the floor.

"Rubis!"

"Palea! Help!" cried Rubis.

These were the last words anyone would hear her utter as a human being.

There was a flash and an explosion of purple smoke. Rubis fell from the ceiling. Palea tried to catch her, but all he clutched in his arms was her pink gown. Then, from within that gown, a red bird emerged. Palea stared at the bird in confusion as it flew about the room, chirping in dismay.

“Ah ha ha—bull’s-eye! Well done, Ogma,” Samra cried, clapping her hands.

“I’ve still got it,” Ogma boasted, then added: “Our work here is done, Samra. Time to go!”

The two witches had already reached the balcony by the time Palea realized what had happened. “Wait!” he shouted. “Turn her back! Turn her back to Rubis!” He ran after them, grabbing hold of Samra’s arm. “Bring her back,” he begged. “I’ll give you anything you desire!” But the cackling witches disappeared in a puff of foul smoke, and Palea was left holding onto the balcony railing.

Rushing back into the room, he saw that the red bird had entered the golden cage and huddled there, shivering, as if afraid to venture into the outside world.

Now, remembering the scene, the king was racked with grief; Agnis, trying to console him, felt her own eyes well up with tears. They clung to each other, weeping, trying to find some comfort in their shared anguish. They stayed that way for a long time, until the sound of footsteps came clicking down the hall. Looking up from her father’s shoulder, Agnis saw the regal sweep of a long skirt and a pair of fashionable high-heeled shoes.

Ramua.

“Tsk,” said Ramua. “You poor thing. What a terrible tragedy.” As she spoke, Ramua shut the door of the birdcage

and handed it to one of her attendants. "Please place this in the main hall, where everyone can see it. I want Rubis to have a place of *honor* here."

"Mother!" As the attendant turned to leave, Agnis made a lunge for the cage, but Ramua held her back with a firm hand. Agnis looked pleadingly toward her father, but he followed after the attendant with the birdcage, seeming to have forgotten about her entirely.

"Poor dear," the queen murmured, stroking her hair. "You've been through such an ordeal. I can only imagine how distressed you must be. But don't worry, darling. We're going to do everything possible to get your mother back. And in the meantime . . ." Ramua bent closer to Agnis and smiled. Agnis had never seen such a smile before. It was as if the emotionless mask that had been plastered over Ramua's face for years had suddenly cracked and fallen away, revealing a grinning skull beneath.

"In the meantime," Ramua said, "you'll stay here in the palace with us! Won't that be *nice*?"

CHAPTER II:

ESCAPE AND BETRAYAL



After that, everything changed. As quickly and casually as a candle being snuffed out, the sunny, carefree life that Agnis had known before was swallowed up by bitterness and gloom.

Instead of returning to her bright summer palace, Agnis was kept at the castle and installed, under Ramua's watchful eye, in new quarters: a cramped, dark garret at the top of the north-facing tower. K'nock was transferred to a cage in the royal zoo. It broke Agnis' heart to see her beloved pet pacing fitfully behind iron bars.

All of her servants were sent away. She was allowed one attendant, Maira, from the royal staff. The maid was able to provide some cheer and comfort during the day. But at night, when Maira said goodnight and locked the door behind her, Agnis lay in bed, shivering—the stone tower retained a chill, even in summer, that no number of blankets could dispel—she would gaze up through the badly installed transom, listening to

the wind as it whistled through the chinks in the window, and wonder what would become of her.

King Palea was beside himself with grief. At first, he did everything in his power to lift the curse. He called together his court magicians, directing them to use all the skill and art at their disposal to change his beloved Rubis back to her human form. But it was no use. Nothing they could conjure had the slightest effect. The small red bird remained a bird, squawking, looking up at them helplessly.

At least the location of the witches was no mystery. Samra and Ogma were known to live in a mansion at the heart of an enchanted wood whose very name reflected their presence: the Witches' Forest. Because the Witches' Forest was not in Fiana, but instead in neighboring Froll, Palea couldn't just march his army in and capture the two witches however he wished. The king of Froll, due to the ongoing war with Ponzo, refused to give Palea permission to mount a military expedition. Instead, Palea had to rely upon small parties of adventurers. He dispatched dozens of them into the Witches' Forest over the following months. Days and weeks went by as the king brooded, waiting for some news from his emissaries. Not a single one ever returned.

Finally, the king decided that he would go after the witches himself. He tried to sneak out of the castle one night with a small group of trusted servants, but Queen Ramua had somehow gotten wind of the plan and put a stop to it. His place, she told him, was on the throne, governing his people, not gallivanting off to a foreign country like some common adventurer. The royal advisors agreed with the queen.

After that, Palea plunged into such a dire depression that Agnis feared for his health. He stopped bathing. He barely ate or slept. And he stopped paying attention to the affairs of

government. He just sat in the chair in Rubis' room and brooded, not responding when he was spoken to, sunk in deep despair. It frightened Agnis to see her father reduced to such a state. The servants began to whisper that the king had gone mad.

It was Ramua who filled the vacuum of power. She took firm command of castle and kingdom, ruling in her husband's name with a sure and competent hand. Since the incident with the witches, she, too, had changed. Silver hairs had appeared on her head—they ran through her light brown hair like strands of glinting metal—and wrinkles had etched themselves on her forehead and at the corners of her eyes. She looked drawn, older, a mere shadow of her former self.

"Look how worn-out she is," the courtiers gossiped. "But of course she's going gray, poor thing—she has so much to worry about! How brave she is, how noble, to stand in for her husband during this trying time. And how generous she's been to the *child!*" they added in whispers, peering over their fans at Agnis, who sat alone at the far end of the table, hardly touching her dinner, which was, after all, composed of leftovers from the servants' table.

Only Agnis seemed to notice that the queen appeared to be gratified by all that had happened. She exercised her newfound power with satisfaction, even enjoyment, and while she made a show of praying for her husband's recovery, she didn't seem too eager for it to take place anytime soon. And when she smiled at Agnis, the malicious sparkle in the queen's eyes sent chills down the young girl's spine.

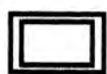
One day, walking along the great hall, Agnis had interrupted Ramua in the act of clipping her mother's wings. Hearing the bird's distressed cry, she ran toward Ramua, begging her to stop. Tears streamed down her face as she tugged the sleeve of Ramua's robe.

"Please," she sobbed, "leave her alone. Just leave her alone!"

"Don't be silly, darling," Ramua murmured soothingly. "I'm just *trimming* her. After all," she turned to face the weeping girl, her voice oozing with concern, "it would be just *awful* if she flew away . . . by accident."

With that, she turned back to the small bird in her hand, brandishing her scissors. *Snip, snip* . . . The gorgeous red plumage spiraled to the floor.

It was at that moment, looking at the red feathers on the tiled floor of the great hall, that Agnis grasped the full force of Ramua's hatred. She realized that if she did not do something, this woman would kill her mother. Soon it would be red blood, not feathers, covering the floor.



That evening, in the quiet of her room, Agnis made a decision. In spite of her indolent appearance, the girl had always been quick-tempered and stubborn, and once she made up her mind to do something, there was nothing that would shake her resolve. So, on that day when she decided that she must leave, she packed her wheeled trunk and summoned Maira to her chamber, asking her to release K'nock from his cage at the zoo on the pretext that the princess would take him for a walk, as she was permitted to do twice each day, in the morning and evening. Maira wept as Agnis related her plans and made the girl promise to look after her mother.

"Oh, Princess," Maira cried, "I will guard the lady Rubis with my life. Oh, Lady Agnis, please be careful!"

They embraced. Then Agnis pulled back, struck with a sudden thought. "What about you, Maira? Surely you're putting your life in danger by allowing me to escape, right?"

After all, you're supposed to be locking me in! What will you tell the queen?"

"Don't worry about me," the maid assured her. "I have a sleeping potion in my room. I'll tell the queen that you drugged me and seized the key. As soon as you're gone, I'll get the potion and lay myself out on the floor right here. She'll never suspect a thing."

Clasping her trusted servant's hand, Agnis looked into her eyes. "You have done well, Maira. I can never repay you for the service you are rendering to my mother and me. Thank you!" With that, she grabbed her magician's staff and rushed down to the great hall as quietly as possible, pulling her trunk behind her.

The clock in the great hall struck midnight as Agnis tiptoed down the stairs and peeked around the corner. The hall was empty and dark and, aside from the last reverberating echoes of the clock's chimes, silent. The birdcage that held her mother was covered for the night. Checking again to make certain she was alone, Agnis crept forward and raised the drapery covering the cage.

"Mother," she said softly. The red bird had its head tucked under one wing, but it woke at the sound of Agnis' voice, shaking its feathers and blinking at her in happy recognition.

"Mother, I'm going to lift your enchantment. I'm going after those witches, and when I find them, we'll change you back. Even if I have to kill them myself, we'll save you!"

Rubis' small bird-eyes filled with panic. Without any human means to object, she gave a piercing shriek and flapped her clipped wings frantically against the bars of her cage. Agnis raised a finger to her lips.

"Shh! Be quiet—you'll wake everyone." Agnis glanced over her shoulder apprehensively. "I'm sorry, Mother," she

whispered. "I know how you must feel, but I have to do this. Maira will keep you safe. I'd take you with me, but one of the other adventurers might come back with an antidote at any time. I have to go alone."

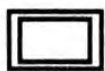
Just then, Maira appeared in the doorway with K'nock and signaled for the princess to hurry.

"Don't worry, Mother." Agnis felt tears welling in her eyes but forced herself to smile. "I'll be fine. You'll see! We'll lift the curse and you'll be back to normal! And when Father sees you, he'll get better too. We'll all be together again soon!"

The bird let out a sorrowful chirp.

"Goodbye, Mother." Holding back her tears, Agnis lowered the drapery over the birdcage and crossed to the doorway where Maira waited with K'nock. She kissed her maid goodbye, then, with the snow leopard at her side, she made her way out of the castle.

It wasn't easy. Many times, as guards patrolled the corridors, she came perilously close to detection. But at last she stepped through a door and stood outside the castle walls under a night sky ablaze with stars. She paused there, breathing in the fresh air of freedom. Then she ran as if her life depended upon it—as indeed it did.



In a high window on the second floor of the castle, two pairs of eyes watched as the cloaked figure and the ghostly snow leopard made for the shelter of a nearby wood. Queen Ramua chuckled to herself and turned to the young woman who stood meekly beside her.

"You have done well," she said. "And you will be very well rewarded."

"I live only to serve Fiana, your majesty," replied Maira with a curtsy.

"You may go," said the queen.

Gaze respectfully lowered, the maid backed from the room and shut the door behind her.

After she had gone, the queen looked to the corner of the seemingly empty room. "Your quarry is loosed," she said quietly.

A tall, slim man stepped out of the shadows and bowed silently. The queen gestured him forward. When he had come near and bowed again, she pulled a small bag of gold from the folds of her gown and placed it into his outstretched hand.

"Be discreet," she commanded. "I want it to look like an accident. But leave nothing to chance. Do it with your own hands, if possible."

The man put one hand on his breast and bowed a third time, lowering his head in acknowledgment of her command.

CHAPTER 12:

A STRANGE CREW



Duan and Olba listened sympathetically as Agnis related her story. When she was finished, they sat quietly for a moment, pondering this new information. Finally, Olba broke the silence.

“So, this assassin,” he said, “the one who’s following you. You think he was sent by the queen?”

Agnis nodded pensively. “I can’t prove it, of course. But that arrow was made in Fiana. It makes sense that she’d send someone after me just as soon as she learned that I’d gone. It must have been like a dream come true for her!”

“You think she wanted you to escape?” asked Olba.

“I don’t know. Maybe. It’s weird, but even though I was a prisoner at the castle, I was actually safe there. I see that now. With all the courtiers and servants, there were just too many witnesses for her to have me killed. But now? Out here in the middle of the forest? It’s open season. If I die out here, nobody will ever know. Nobody except Ramua, that is.”

“Man, that queen must really hate you,” said Duan.

“I wish I knew why,” Agnis said. “I never did anything to her. I mean, I would have been happy to be her friend.”

“Women like her don’t have friends,” Olba said. “I’ve worked for the nobility before, and I know her type. She tolerated your existence as long as you kept your distance. But from what you told us, it sounds like your father thought about making you his heir instead of his son, or even one of his other daughters. If you ask me, that’s what’s behind this assassin. Hate probably doesn’t even enter into it. Not really. This is about power.” Olba sighed. “Well,” he went on in a joking manner, trying to cheer Agnis up, “this’ll definitely make the quest more interesting, traveling with a walking dart-board!”

“I wish I knew how he found me,” Agnis fretted. “I disguised myself and everything. I mean, look. I’m wearing such plain clothes!”

She spread out her cloth mantle to show them how drab it was, and then she spun around. Olba and Duan just looked at each other and smirked. It really wouldn’t do any good to tell Agnis that even in the shabbiest cloak she could find, she still looked about as plain as a cockatoo in a room full of crows.

Agnis went on earnestly. “I was so careful! I just don’t understand it! Unless—” She gasped as the thought occurred to her. “He must’ve followed me all the way from the castle!” She turned to K’nock, who was licking his paw. “I can’t believe I never noticed him. Did you know he was there, K’nock?”

The big cat turned to look at her, blinked, and went back to licking his paw.

“He’s been following you for that long?” said Duan. “He must be a pretty lousy assassin! I mean, no offense, but you’re only a Level 4 . . .” Duan thought for a moment. “Wait

a minute. If you're a Level 4 now, does that mean you were already adventuring when you were still at the castle?"

"Well, yeah." Agnis blushed a little. "While I was doing research on Ogma and Samra, I started training as an adventurer. The local magic school has a summer program, so I thought I'd pick up some credits. I mean, I wouldn't just go out after witches unprepared!" Agnis snorted at the preposterous thought. "I'm not stupid, you know."

"You leveled up to a four in a *summer* program?"

"Well, almost." Agnis chuckled. "I mean, it wasn't until I killed that fake hydra that I actually leveled up to four."

"And this summer program was how long ago?" Duan asked, trying hard to do so in a reasonable tone of voice.

"Let's see, it would have been . . ." Agnis thought. "Two months ago?"

"Two months?" Duan nearly shouted. "No way!"

"Yeah, way." Agnis took out her Adventurer's Card and handed it to him. "Here, take a look."

Duan peered anxiously at the card. Yes, there it was—the issue date was for the second of July. *And today is September tenth. She's not lying. It's only been two months.*

Two lousy months! How the heck does anyone go up FOUR LEVELS in TWO MONTHS?

"Oh . . ." Duan hung his head. He felt as if all the gutter slimes in his hometown had just risen up as one and then beaten him down.

Seeing his dismay, Agnis laughed.

Great. Now she's laughing at me.

"Don't feel bad!" Agnis said, taking back her card. "The only reason I leveled up so fast is 'cause I can perform the Fire spell at a really, really high level. That's all. But if you want to know the truth, I'm not very good at other spells."

"Wait," said Duan, puzzling it all out, "does that have something to do with your mother being an Elementaller?"

Agnis nodded. "I have some sort of . . . thing. An infinity."

"An *affinity*," Duan corrected her through gritted teeth.

"Yeah. That." Agnis shrugged her shoulders. "Whatever. That's what the teacher at the magic school said. Because of my mother, I have this affinity for fire, which allows me to cast these really powerful spells."

"And that's why you can beat high-level monsters," Olba interjected. "I thought it must be something like that."

Agnis nodded eagerly. "Yeah. My first monster kill was a basilisk!"

"A—*wh-what?*" Duan sputtered. *I've never even SEEN a basilisk! How much would one of those be worth?* "They have basilisks at summer school?" he asked incredulously.

"We had one imported." Agnis looked pleased with herself. "I wasn't really supposed to kill it or anything. It was actually kind of tame. But one thing led to another, and, well, it's kind of a long story."

"I can imagine," said Olba, rolling his eyes.

"Anyway, I got three hundred points for that one!"

Olba rubbed his chin, doing some quick calculations in his head. "Hmm . . . Yeah, with a basilisk, a beginner would level up with just one. Why, you'd go straight to Level 3!"

"Man, that's so unfair!" Duan couldn't help it; he unintentionally started shouting. "Why are things always so unfair?!"

Check hopped over to Duan and nuzzled his cheek. "Kiii?" he inquired. "Heal spell?"

Agnis gave Duan a sympathetic pat on the shoulder. "I'm sorry, Duan," she said. "I'm sure you'll level up, sooner or later! So cheer up."

"You know," said Duan, "I think I liked it better when you were laughing at me."

"Okay, knock it off, you guys." Olba leaned forward, suddenly serious. "We've got more important things to worry about. For instance, what are we going to do about the assassin?"

Agnis meditated for a moment. Then she glanced up decisively. "There's nothing we can do," she said. "We know he's there. He's bound to show himself sooner or later, so we'll bide our time and watch our backs. If we start looking for him, we'll only waste time. Right now, we should concentrate on getting to the witches' mansion."

Olba nodded. "The map says that it's nearby. If we leave now, we should get there before sunset. Are you with me?"

"Aye, aye!" said Duan.

"Me too," said Agnis.

"Go mansion!" Check chirped brightly.

A growl from K'nock.

"Right. The team is agreed." Olba stood up, stretching. "Let's get moving. Check, you fly on ahead. See if you can find the witches' mansion. It can't be that far away. If you see anything, report back."

"Kii! Check scout! For team!" The baby grinia zoomed off through the trees.

They finished packing up camp. Agnis checked on K'nock; the wounds the hydra had inflicted seemed to be healing nicely. When she was satisfied that he could walk by himself, she looked around. "Where's my trunk?"

"Over here." Duan leaned down to pick it up, but Agnis stopped him.

"It's okay," she said, smiling. "I can get it myself." Trundling the trunk behind her, Agnis set off down the path, K'nock at her side.

Duan looked after her, astonished. *There's more to Agnis than meets the eye*, he thought. He followed behind her, reflecting on the number of times she'd surprised him, just today. *First, I find out she's a princess. Then there's her whole weird life. And now, I find out she became a Level 4 after only two months of adventuring! Not to mention the whole Fire spell thing.*

And she seems to be a lot nicer than I thought, too.

Hours had passed since the encounter with the hydra. It was only the middle of the afternoon, but even so, it was dark beneath the trees and getting darker as they progressed farther into the thickening forest. The leafy branches overhead threw dusky patterns over everything. Duan could barely make out the heads of Olba and Agnis, walking in front of him, as they dipped in and out of the rustling shade.

The vegetation was also growing denser as they went deeper and deeper into the forest. By now the grass was up to Duan's chest, and its edges were sharp enough to cut exposed skin. The thick, high grass was also making it difficult to see the intermittent paving stones, now covered with slick moss. A cacophony of insect cries assaulted their ears, rising and falling in its buzzing cadence. And the humid air became downright steamy. The heady smell of damp earth and plant life rose up all around them.

As he trudged along, Duan considered his companions: Agnis, the runaway princess; K'nock, the snow leopard; Olba, who was turning out to be kind of a good-hearted guy after all; and finally, his old friend Check, the baby grinia.

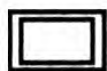
We're a strange crew, that's for sure.

"Hey, Duan! Stop daydreaming, or you're gonna get left behind!" Olba's voice echoed through the forest.

Duan shook himself from his thoughts, sighed, and then hurried ahead.

Just as he reached the others, a familiar squawk rang out through the trees. Duan saw a small green thing buzzing through the air toward him. It was Check!

“Giiis!” the grinia called excitedly. “House! Witches’ house! Chaaa!”



Every inch of the three-story building—the walls, the windows, the pillars, the roof—was overgrown with thick, heavy greenery. Grass sprouted out of every crevice in the moss-covered stones. Flowering vines trailed from the roof, over the walls, wove themselves over windows, and wound around the neighboring trees—pushing their crazy tendrils everywhere, until it was hard to tell where the house ended and the forest began.

Strangely colored mushrooms and ferns and all kinds of shoots and buds grew in riotous profusion, and millions of small insects squirmed all over them. The house seemed to breathe and shudder with teeming life. It looked as if it were about to be pulled apart by the twisted vegetation—or perhaps that was all that held it together.

The adventurers stood in awe before the mansion.

“How do we get in?” Duan ventured to ask.

It was a good question. Finding a door in this mass of tangled vines was a quest unto itself. Olba pushed away the high grass to get a better view.

“Ugh . . .” He wrinkled up his nose. “*What* is that *smell*?”

Duan took a deep sniff and wished he hadn’t. Mixed in with the pungent scent of vegetation was the odor of something rotting. “I—” he began, only to be interrupted by Check.

“Danger! Danger! Eeeeeei!” The baby grinia swooped over their heads, his wings beating frantically.

"What is it?" Olba looked around, but nothing could be seen. "Damn this grass!"

"Check, what is it?" called Duan. "Can you—"

A high, piercing scream rang out.

"That's Agnis!" he shouted.

"The assassin!" cried Olba.

Duan and Olba, their hands on their swords, set off at a run. Pushing aside the heavy grass, they followed the sound of Agnis' screams, which became increasingly hysterical.

They found her backed up against a tree, staring in terror at something in front of her. When she saw Olba and Duan approaching, she pointed with the end of her staff.

"Look at them! They're horrible . . . horrible!"

Duan and Olba looked. There on the ground in front of her was a cluster of green slimes. Hardly a cluster, actually: there were four of them. Four green slimes, the lowest-level monsters of the slime family, taking a leisurely stroll in the late-afternoon sun.

They were each about as big as a thumb. Until Agnis' foot came crashing down in their path, they hadn't been a bother to anyone at all.

"You have *got* to be kidding me," Duan said. "You're screaming about *slimes*?"

"They attacked me," Agnis shrieked. "They were climbing . . . right up . . . my foot!"

The truth was, Agnis couldn't stand slimes and other invertebrates; to her, they might as well have been evil demons spewed up from the depths of hell. Their disgusting jellylike consistency; the way their vestigial inner organs were visible through their translucent skin; the thin slime trails they left behind them as they crawled across the ground: everything about them made her want to retch each time she saw one.

She'd rather be dead than touch a slime—and she'd rather the slime be dead than ever come near anywhere she might encounter one.

Olba laughed uproariously. “Don’t worry,” he joked. “Duan will protect you. I hear these monsters are his specialty.”

“Oh, shut *up*,” Duan shouted and hit Olba on the arm, but Olba was too busy laughing to mind it much.

The two of them were so preoccupied with each other that they didn’t notice when Agnis went quiet. It wasn’t until the wind started blowing and her hair twitched eerily around her face that they realized she was murmuring under her breath. She had started chanting!

“Hey. *Hey!* Don’t do that!” Olba shouted. “Duan, stop her! She’s going to use that damn Fire spell again!”

“Huh? Uh—okay.” Duan hesitated for a second; then, in a panic, he moved behind Agnis and cupped his hand over her mouth, pinning her arms behind her.

“*Unami sigo, manisaya*—mmph! Mmm-mmm-mmmph!”

Furious, Agnis struggled against Duan’s hold, but being stronger than she was, he managed to keep her from wrestling free of his arms. After a moment, she sighed in exasperation and went limp.

“Okay, I think she’s fine now. I’m gonna—OW!” When Duan loosened his hold, Agnis bit his hand. As Duan pulled his stinging hand away, she began chanting again.

“Why, you little . . .” This time Duan reached out, grabbing the girl’s wrist and twisting it.

“Owww! Let me go!” Agnis winced in pain and started screaming, but at least she had stopped chanting. K’nock, who had been watching patiently until now, advanced on Duan, growling and looking as if he might pounce.

It was an intimidating prospect, but Duan remained firm. “You have *got* to be kidding me!” He shouted at the snow leopard. “Do you want to get fried?”

K’nock backed off at that, looking a bit sheepish.

Agnis rubbed her wrist, scowling at the others. “All right, all right,” she said. “I stopped, all right? Is that what you wanted?”

Olba walked up to Agnis, speaking quietly. “Let me ask you something,” he said. “Can’t you use a magic spell that’s appropriate for those tiny slimes?”

“Fiery death *is* appropriate for such disgusting creatures!”

Olba interrupted her before she could get all worked up again. “No, Agnis. Thanks to all your screaming, we’ve probably already lost the element of surprise. And using a high-level Fire spell in the middle of all this vegetation is liable to incinerate everything, us included! Plus, you’ll faint again, and then we’ll have to worry about lugging you around while the whole place goes up in flames!”

“But—” the girl sputtered.

“These are *green slimes*, Agnis,” Olba continued without missing a beat. “The lowest of the low. What’s appropriate for them is a Level 1 or Level 2 spell. An average, everyday Fire spell. Do you have something like that in your bag of tricks? If you *do*, well, then, I won’t stop you. Go on and cast it, be my guest. Pick on things weaker than you are. Burn those harmless little slimes away.”

As Olba delivered this lecture, the tiny slimes, perhaps realizing how close they had come to annihilation, scurried away into the grass.

Agnis watched them go and sighed heavily. “All right,” she admitted. “I see your point.”

Olba patted her on the shoulder. “Look, I know that you have strong powers,” he said, his voice kinder now. “But you’re

incapacitated after you've used them. That's why you need to think first, instead of just reacting."

"Okay, okay. Next time I'll count to ten before I do anything. Satisfied?"

"No, I'm not satisfied. I'm the leader of this quest, Agnis. You agreed to that, remember? So what I say goes. And I'm telling you not to use your powers unless I give you the okay first. Got it?"

Agnis nodded sullenly.

"Good." Olba smiled at her. "I wasn't looking forward to carrying your unconscious body into the witches' mansion."

"Ha ha." Agnis stalked off and stood a little distance away, fuming.

When she was out of earshot, Olba pulled Duan aside and whispered in his ear. "It seems that Little Miss Firecracker has a really short fuse. Keep an eye on her, will you? Make sure she doesn't pull any stunts while we're not looking." He patted Duan on the back.

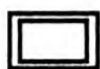
"Who, me?" Duan raised an eyebrow. "What do you think *I* can do to stop her?"

"Just watch her," Olba shot back, and gave Duan a sly wink. "I mean, come on. It's not like you're not staring at her all the time already." He dodged out of the way before Duan could hit him again.

Duan glared at him. Then, sprinting, he caught up with Agnis, who had begun to walk toward the mansion.

"Yeah, well, Olba's right," he said breezily, trying to act casual. "I mean, that's a spectacular Fire spell. It would be a shame to waste it on those stupid slimes. Save it for the witches."

"You better believe I will," Agnis replied with a toss of her red curls.



High up in their cluttered room at the top of the mansion, Ogma and Samra watched in the clouded hand mirror as Agnis spoke those defiant words. The image of the frowning girl wavered and faded as the two witches burst into laughter. They laughed so hard that they had to put the mirror down.

“Ha ha ha! Yeah, Princess! Come and get us!” Ogma cackled.

“Hee hee hee! We’re *waaaaiting!*” Samra taunted.

“Hey, Samra.” Raising a purple eyebrow, Ogma turned to her sister. “I think it’s time for those two little guys you made earlier.”

“Oh, my little lion and my pretty eagle?” Samra stroked the two marionettes and pouted a little. “I almost hate to let them go. I worked so hard on them!”

“Come on!” her sister coaxed. “It’ll be fun.”

“You go first!”

“No, *you!*”

Samra sighed. “All right.” She grinned mischievously, placing both wooden figures on the ground. She passed her hands over them, then pulled a handful of pink powder from a small pouch of pink velvet that hung at her pink belt. Mumbling a few words, she sprinkled the powder over the two marionettes. It sparkled in the air and the two dolls quivered and leapt into the air.

Ogma gasped in admiration as the marionettes began to twirl slowly in the air. The eagle started to stretch its wooden wings and the lion began to move its tiny jointed paws.

“Oh, Samra!” she enthused. “You’ve really outdone yourself this time!”

“Go, my little fledglings,!” Samra commanded. “Work as one, combine your might! Together you will win the fight!”

The lion and the eagle spun around one another, faster and faster, rising higher and higher, as if they were dancing. Finally, whirling so fast that they were barely visible, the two marionettes disappeared in a flash of light.

“Ah ha ha ha ha ha!” Ogma fell on the floor, gasping with laughter. “This is going to be great!”

“Let’s look in the mirror and see what happens!”

“Oh—oh—I can’t! I’m laughing so hard, it hurts!”

The shrill laughter of the two witches echoed through the room. They slapped the table, stamped their feet, and rolled around on the floor, holding onto their sides and gasping for breath. The pet peculeuses that had been sleeping nearby woke up in a fright and dashed about crazily to avoid being stepped on. Their squeaking and scurrying only incited the witches to greater hysteria. It was a completely raucous scene, as though someone had tossed ten cats, ten mice, and ten monkeys into a dark dressing room, thrown in some cosmetic boxes and jewelry cases, and—just to top it all off—the rotting remains of a cake so sweet it would make any normal person faint.

The witches laughed so hard that they failed to notice one important thing. A long, thin wrinkle threaded its way down the flawlessly smooth skin of each of their faces, from forehead to chin.

CHAPTER 13:

CLASH OF THE TITANS



“I guess this is the front door,” said Duan, peering into the darkness beyond the gate.

Walking the perimeter of the house, they had found an ornate wrought-iron gate with an oval shape. The wooden gateposts on either side had nearly rotted away; they sagged under the weight of the abundant growth that had wound its way into every fissure. Clawing away at the vines, Duan and Olba had cleared a hole in the overgrowth big enough to peek through.

They saw a grand entryway that was completely overshadowed by trailing vines, and beyond that, an imposing door. After more work, they were able to push the gate open and enter the courtyard. It was deserted. Families of birds had taken up residence in the eaves of the entry; they swooped to and fro overhead. Stray leaves fell silently upon the cracked pavement stones.

Olba advanced to examine the door. "It doesn't look like there's a lock," he said. "And the frame's rotted through, too. Maybe . . ." Placing his shoulder against the door, he gave it a strong push. The door shook, frightening some birds, but didn't budge. He tried it twice more with an equal lack of success.

"Nope," he admitted at last. "It's not moving."

"Maybe it's held shut with magic," Duan suggested.

"Maybe." Olba heaved a weary sigh. "Well, there's got to be another way in. Let's split up. You and Agnis go that way. I'll look over here."

"Giis?" Check perked up, waiting for instructions.

"You too, Check," said Olba. "Fly overhead and see if you can find an opening: a window, a laundry chute, anything. We have to hurry, though. It'll be dark soon."

Olba was right. The sun was low in the sky; it had fallen below the canopy of trees, and its horizontal light filtered through the low-hanging branches, illuminating the foliage with orange and gold. Clouds of small bugs buzzed lazily in the warm glow.

Walking together, Duan and Agnis searched the left-hand side of the door, with K'nock following close behind. Running his hand over the cascading greenery, Duan inspected every inch of the stonework.

"Can you see anything over there?" he asked Agnis.

Agnis, still smarting from Olba's chastisement, walked alongside him with her arms folded, looking at the ground. At Duan's prompting, she glanced sullenly up at the wall. "Nope," she said at once.

"Come on, Agnis," Duan said crossly. "Look properly, will you? You can't possibly see any—"

He broke off at Agnis' gasp. She stood still, gazing upward. Her eyes were wide with fear.

“What is it?” Duan asked. He craned his neck upward. But all he could see was a dilapidated chimney that had fallen on its side; a few flowers and weeds sprouted from the mound of tumbled bricks.

Agnis grabbed his arm and squeezed it. “Something’s moving up there.”

She was right; with a faint swishing sound, a few dead leaves dropped from the roof. Then Duan saw something sweep over the edge. It looked like a long tail, with a tuft of fur at the end.

“There it is again!” said Agnis.

“Is that . . . a lion’s tail?”

“Keiiii!” Check called from above them. “Danger! Danger!”

At the sound, a head poked out from the other side of the ruined chimney. It was an eagle’s head—an eagle’s head as big as the head of a lion. The giant eagle cocked its head left and right, then focused its beady eyes on Duan and Agnis.

“Ow!” Duan winced as Agnis clutched his arm tighter.

“Grrrr . . .” K’nock was also staring up at the roof, the white fur along his spine bristling.

With a harsh cry, the thing began moving. As it pulled its huge body into view, Duan and Agnis stared up in disbelief.

The head and the tail were part of the same creature. It had an eagle’s head and an eagle’s wings, but the creature’s body was covered with tawny fur: it had the body and tail of a lion!

“Oh no. It’s . . . one of those . . . th-things!” Duan stuttered.

“Yeah!” Agnis agreed. “A chimera!”

“No, that’s not it! It’s a . . . um . . .” Duan racked his brains, trying to recall the name of the monster.

"A cockatrice?" Agnis offered.

"No, that's a cross between a snake and a rooster."

"A sphinx?"

"No, that one's got a woman's head."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes!" Duan snapped impatiently. "Um, um, um . . . Shh, let me think! I *know* this!"

The monster crouched on its haunches, getting ready to pounce, when Duan's face lit up. "I know! It's a griffin!"

"Yes!" Agnis was visibly relieved. "Yes! A griffin! Of course!" She actually laughed out loud.

"I told you I knew it," Duan said, feeling proud of himself. "I've studied all the monsters; it's kind of a hobby of mine and—"

Duan broke off as the griffin he had just identified spread its wings and swooped down from the roof with a terrifying cry somewhere between an eagle's strident call and a lion's harsh roar.

"Olbaaaa!" Duan and Agnis shouted in unison as they dove to the ground. The shadow of the griffin spread over their huddled backs as it descended, claws extended. It was about to snatch them up when K'nock pounced, throwing himself against the griffin's side.

Taken by surprise, the griffin tumbled to the ground. But it recovered quickly, rearing up on its hind legs and lunging at the snow leopard with its sharp-hooked beak.

K'nock responded with a roar of his own. He sprang forward, trying to sink his teeth into the griffin's neck. Feathers and fur flew as the two creatures wrestled on the ground.

"Oh no! K'nock!" Agnis reached out toward her snow leopard, but Duan pulled her away from the battle, dragging her to a safe place behind some nearby trees.

“Olba! Help!” Duan yelled as loudly as he could. He looked around, but the fighter was nowhere to be seen. “Dammit, Olba, where are you?”

Helpless, Duan and Agnis could only stand by as the two creatures grappled with each other, locked in mortal combat. The griffin and the snow leopard were evenly matched in terms of strength and ability, but the griffin had the advantage of wings. It would leap forward in attack, then fly away to dodge a blow; then, with K’nock thrown off-balance, it would swoop down again, attacking from above. This went on for some time. K’nock showed signs of exhaustion, his body battered from the fight. Blood and grass stains smeared his white coat, and despite his valiant efforts, his reactions were becoming alarmingly slow. He took a real beating, but his courage never faltered.

It was dreadful to watch. Agnis flinched every time the griffin managed to strike a blow. “Somebody . . . please, do something!” she begged.

“Olba!” Duan got hoarse from calling out the fighter’s name. He still got no reply. Check had set out in search of their companion at the beginning of the fight, but he had not returned either.

Suddenly, Agnis cried out. K’nock stumbled; he had a cut over one eye, and the flow of blood made it hard for him to see. As the griffin passed over his head, K’nock struck out blindly with his paws—and missed. The griffin lunged again, striking with its beak, and caught the big cat between his shoulder blades.

“Raaaaooww . . .” With a pitiful groan, K’nock fell to the ground. He struggled to get to his feet as the griffin, with a savage cry of triumph, wheeled in the air, and returned for another assault.

“That’s *it!*” Agnis stood up, brushing herself off, her eyes ablaze with rage. “I’m going to fry that overgrown chicken in midair!” She took a few deep breaths, clasped her hands around her staff, and began chanting with fierce earnestness.

“Agnis, no!” Duan struggled to drag her back to the ground, trying to cover her mouth before she could speak the operative words. “You can’t use magic!”

“Let me go!” Agnis shouted, wriggling in his grasp. She glared at him over her shoulder. “I’m not going to stand here and let K’nock DIE!”

“But Olba said—”

“The hell with Olba!”

“ ‘The hell,’ you say?”

The voice came from over Duan’s shoulder. Both Duan and Agnis turned, their hearts leaping with hope, as a tall figure came striding toward them from out of the misty woods. It was Olba! Check brought up the rear.

“Well, it’s about time you showed up!” shouted Agnis, pulling out of Duan’s grasp. Duan struggled to get hold of her again, but she shrugged him off. “You always disappear at critical moments!”

Olba didn’t answer. As the griffin and K’nock wrestled on the ground, he strode forward, the heavy long sword grasped in one hand. “Hey!” Olba shouted, addressing the griffin. “Hey, you!”

“Kaa?” Looking up, the griffin cocked its head with a questioning cry.

“Over here, you big overgrown chunk of wood!” Olba swung the sword in circles above his head, getting the beast’s attention. “You want a fight? Come and get it!”

The griffin spread its wings and launched itself right at him. Olba’s sword whistled through the air and glanced off one

of the creature's claws. Shrieking with rage, the griffin veered to one side; Olba had to duck to avoid being knocked over by its great flapping wings. Then, wheeling back into the air, the griffin prepared to dive again.

"K'nock, go!" Olba shouted, keeping his eyes on the monster. "Get out of here! Quick, while I've got its attention!"

The snow leopard raised its head and blinked at Olba, then limped away from the battleground. Emerging from the bushes, Duan and Agnis ran to K'nock's side.

"Oh, K'nock. K'nock!" Agnis threw her arms around the snow leopard's neck. "I was so worried!"

"Mrrroow," rumbled the leopard reassuringly.

Duan inspected K'nock's back. Although it was soaked with blood, none of the wounds seemed deep. "He's going to be fine," Duan pronounced. "It looks worse than it really is. Check, can you stop the bleeding?"

"Stop? Blood? Giis!" The baby grinia nodded, very eager to help.

"Great. And can you cast a Heal spell on him, too?"

"Heal, giis!"

Agnis looked on in amazement as the bleeding stopped and the edges of K'nock's wounds closed up a bit. The leopard sighed in relief.

"Wow." Agnis raised her eyebrows in surprise. "This little guy, he can use magic?"

"Yeah. They're pretty low-level spells, but they come in handy."

"I'll say," Agnis murmured appreciatively. She looked at the baby grinia, her eyes beaming with gratitude. "Thank you, Check!"

"Aw . . . giis." A suddenly bashful Check hid his head.

“Hey!” Olba, who continued to fight the griffin, sounded annoyed. “Would you guys quit dawdling? We still need to find an entrance before this thing—*whoa!*” The fighter dove into the tall grasses, narrowly avoiding the griffin’s claws. His voice seemed to rise from nowhere. “I’m not sure how much longer I can keep this up!”

“I’m on it!” Duan left K’nock in Agnis’ arms. With an apprehensive glance upward to see where the griffin was, he took off running across the open space. He arrived at the wall of the mansion and began searching frantically for an entrance.

Entrance, entrance . . . need an entrance . . . Ah!

Spotting a bulge in the ivy-covered wall, Duan sprinted ahead and scrambled through the tangled, glossy leaves. There was a window underneath, but it was reinforced with crisscrossed iron bars. Try as he might, he could not shake them loose.

“Shoot!” Duan slapped at the bars in frustration. “Well, *that’s* no good.”

“Duan! Duan! Giis!”

“Yes, Check,” Duan responded irritably, not even bothering to look up. “There’s danger. We know. Lots and lots of danger. So if you don’t mind, I’m trying to—”

“Duan, *giis!*” The grinia called again, with more urgency.

“Check, I’m busy!” Duan turned to scold Check, but he couldn’t see him anywhere. “Check?”

“Giis! Check here! Here!”

Duan looked up, looked down—and saw the golden crest of Check’s head, still singed from Agnis’ Fire spell, poking out between the iron bars of a drainage hole. Duan slapped his forehead. *Of course!* he thought. He had searched the entire wall, but he hadn’t thought of looking along the ground!

“Good work, Check!” Duan fell to his knees beside the drain. It was covered with the same crisscrossed bars as the window, but beyond that, the opening seemed to be wide enough for a person to pass through, and there were even a few stairs visible. The ground around the bars was wet and slightly sunken from the water runoff.

Duan’s hands shook with anticipation as he placed them on the bars. He gave one good tug and was surprised when he fell backward onto the ground. The bars were still in his hands—he had pulled them loose!

He laughed with relief. “Hey, it worked!” He stood up, waving to Olba. “Hey! Hey! Over here. Check found a drain!”

“Get Agnis and the leopard to safety,” Olba shouted back. “I’ll hold this thing off!”

Duan nodded and motioned to Agnis. Quickly, while Olba continued to divert the griffin, she hurried over to the drainpipe, followed by K’nock. Agnis looked down into the dark opening and wrinkled her nose.

“Are you *sure* this is the way in?” she asked skeptically.

“Would you just *go*?” Duan all but pushed her inside; at last Agnis went, stepping hesitantly on the slippery steps, one hand holding tight to K’nock’s fur. Duan entered behind the snow leopard, then turned and called to Olba. “Olba, come on!”

“About time!” Slashing at the griffin’s wings, the fighter turned and ran as fast as he could for the drain, with the monster in hot pursuit.

“Come on! Come on!” urged Duan and Agnis as Olba sprinted toward the drain, glancing back over his shoulder at the griffin. The beast gained on him; its huge wings overshadowed the fighter and its claws stretched wide.

“Make room,” Duan said to Agnis. “He’s coming!”

“Stop pushing!” Agnis replied. “There *is* no room!”

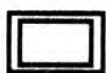
“Are you *kidding* me? Go down the stairs!”

“There *are* no more stairs!”

“Look out below!” With a final effort, Olba dove toward the drain just as the griffin overtook him—the beast passed over his head in a rush of air.

“Aaaah!” Duan recoiled as the fighter came crashing down on top of him. The impact sent him reeling back into Agnis. As Agnis had reported, the stairs came to an end. Below, the drain descended in a smooth, slick chute.

Down the chute they fell in a screaming tangle of arms and legs.



Three distinct screams echoed up the narrow chute as our heroes bumped their way down, slipping and sliding, for what seemed like a very long time. Finally, they all shot out of the shaft at the bottom, landing in a heap on a hard, dirt floor—all except for K’nock, who landed on his feet.

“Oof!”

“Oww!”

“Eep!”

The trio moaned, checking their injuries. Check, who had sensibly *flown* down the drainpipe instead of *falling* down it, fluttered after them. He landed lightly on the ground beside the sprawling pile of humans, then cocked his head inquiringly.

“Giia? Team okay?” he asked.

“I think everyone’s okay, Check.” Duan groaned and blinked down at the others, feeling a bit stunned. “Agnis, are you all right?”

Agnis had landed at the bottom of the pile; her muffled voice could barely be heard. "I'll be okay," she said irritably, "if someone would take his *foot* out of my *eye*!"

"Sorry, sorry." Olba withdrew his leg and accidentally banged Duan in the nose with his knee.

"Ow!"

"Sorry!" The big fighter looked at Duan guiltily. Duan scowled at him, rubbing his face, as Olba faltered for an explanation. "Long legs," he said at last.

Rubbing her head, Agnis sat up. "What is this place?"

Good question. They appeared to have landed in a dimly lit cellar. Some murky light filtered in from a narrow window high up in one corner of the room. Other than that, there was the dirt floor and a few pillars here and there, holding up the high ceiling.

Olba stood up stiffly. "There must be a way out of here. Hey, Duan, grab the Port-o-Lant. I'm going to do some reconnaissance."

"The what?"

"Reconnaissance. You know, I'm going to look around."

Duan frowned. "No, I mean, the Port-o-Lant?"

"Portable . . . *lantern*?" said Olba, raising an eyebrow in scorn.

"Okay, okay! Why didn't you just *say* so?"

Duan found the lantern hanging on the side of the fighter's rucksack and handed it to Olba. Olba turned it on, and they were immediately surrounded by a strong, even light. The lantern was small, but it was very powerful.

Taking the lantern with him, Olba searched the various corners of the room and found an exit across from the narrow window.

"Looks like there's a hallway through this doorway," the fighter reported. "Wow, it's dark. Wait here," he said and

disappeared. Without the lantern, the room fell back into gloom. Duan heard Olba's receding footsteps, then silence.

"Ugh." Standing up, Agnis examined the state of her clothes and made a face. "Look at all this *dirt!*" She started beating on her skirt with both hands, and clouds of dust rose up.

Duan coughed. "Do you mind? You're raising a lot of—"

"AAAAAH!" A scream from Agnis cut him off. "Aaaah! It's on me! Get it off! Get it *off!*"

"What is it?" Duan asked in alarm.

"Look at my back, *look!*" Hopping around and swatting at herself as if doing some kind of crazed dance, Agnis turned her back toward Duan. "*There!* What is it?"

"Jeez, Agnis," he said, unable to suppress a chuckle, "it's only a spider."

"Get it off!" Agnis shrieked.

"Get it off me!" She shuddered. "Ugh, I could feel its . . . *legs*. Oh damn, I hate spiders!" She continued to tremble as Duan, trying not to laugh, gingerly picked the spider off of her back.

After slimes, creatures with eight legs were the most disgusting things Agnis could think of in the world.

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"I don't know what you're freaking out about," Duan said as he placed the spider on the dirt floor. "It won't hurt you; it's just a daddy longlegs. And anyway, spiders are the good kind of insects, you know? They eat the harmful ones. Although technically spiders aren't insects at all, they're arachnids. Did you know—hey, don't do that!"

While Duan had slipped into lecture mode, Agnis had found a brick on the ground and raised it up, preparing to squash the spider. Duan grabbed her arm as the daddy longlegs, seizing its chance, scurried away.

"Jeez, what is *with* you?" he demanded. "Honestly, you are so aggressive!" He'd expected just about any kind of response except a smile. "Wh-what?" he stammered.

"Wow. You really are a pacifist, aren't you? It's kind of cute, actually."

"Cute?" Duan could feel his face getting hot; he was suddenly grateful the room was dimly lit, so Agnis wouldn't see him blushing.

"Yeah," Agnis continued. She patted him sympathetically on the shoulder. "You're too nice. That's probably why you haven't leveled up, you know?"

"Wha—?" *What a brat!* "Let me tell you something, Agnis. Just because I don't go around *torching* everything—"

"Hey!" Agnis' face brightened with an idea. "Can I see your Adventurer's Card?"

This brought Duan up short. He clutched the Adventurer's Card that hung around his neck. "W-why?" he stammered again.

"I just want to *see* it!"

"No, you can't. It's nothing special. What do you want to see it for, anyway?" Duan backed away, pushing the card further down into his shirt. "It's just an Adventurer's Card. You've got your own, if you want to look at one."

"But I've never seen anyone else's," Agnis pouted. "All this time, I haven't been traveling with anybody but K'nock. I've never even talked to another adventurer!" She blinked at him innocently. "Please?"

"No."

"Aw, come on! You saw mine!" She made a grab for the string around Duan's neck, but he pulled away. They spun in a circle, arguing, as she continued to lunge for the card.

"I'll show you later."

"I want to see it now!"

"Nah."

"Come on!"

"It's too dark in here. You can't see it anyway."

"I *can* see it!"

"No, you can't."

"Pleeeeeease?"

"No!"

"Argh!" Agnis stopped chasing him, out of breath, and pushed her lip out. "Why are you being so mean to me?"

"I'm not being mean!"

"You are!"

Vexed beyond patience, Duan almost replied with words he'd surely regret, when footsteps interrupted them. A bright light filled the room.

"Olba!" Duan practically fell over himself in his haste to run over to the fighter. *Boy, am I glad to see you!* "Did you find anything?"

"Sure did." Olba pointed back the way he'd come. "Through that door over there, at the end of a hall, there's another room like this one, with a chute in the ceiling that looks an awful lot like the one we just fell through."

"Oh yeah?"

“Yeah. And earlier, when I was checking the other side of the mansion, I noticed a courtyard in back, with another entryway to the house. Except that the witches must have placed some kind of invisible barrier around the courtyard, because whenever I walked toward it, it pushed me away.”

“So . . .” Duan figured it out. “You think that if we go up this other drain shaft, we’ll enter the courtyard, inside the magic barrier, and be able to get to the back door of the mansion.”

“Exactly.” Olba grinned.

“Okay then, let’s get out of here! I can’t stand sitting around in this dark room,” said Agnis.

“Hang on,” said Olba. “If you don’t like the dark, you’re going to need this.” He lifted the Port-o-Lant, illuminating the dark hallway, and the adventurers ventured forward.

K’nock, who had been resting, slowly lifted his body and followed his mistress. Since Check’s spell, his wounds had healed nicely, but his movements were still tentative.

I guess the griffin did quite a bit of damage to him, thought Duan as he watched the snow leopard limp ahead.

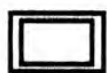
The hall, like the room they had just vacated, looked dusty and abandoned. At the end of the corridor, it split in two directions. Agnis started to veer to the right.

“Not that way,” Olba cautioned. “That way leads to a dead end. Go left. Here, follow the rope.” Swinging the lantern, he showed her a long, thin rope, about a quarter-inch thick, running along one wall. It emerged from a large silver disc that he held in his other hand. “I marked the way with my Coily Coily Rope. Watch your step—it’s really easy to get lost down here.”

“Huh. Why would anyone want to build a hallway that leads nowhere?”

“Beats me. The basement’s full of them, though. Half the time you’re running into dead ends, the other half you’re going in circles. It took me forever to find that other drain.”

The light of the Port-o-Lant bobbed down the hallway as our heroes inched onward, following the rope in Olba’s hand.



Ogma and Samra lay down their magic mirror and collapsed in laughter.

“Ha ha ha!” Samra wiped away her tears of mirth, imitating the princess’ voice. “ ‘I don’t know *why* anyone would build a hallway that goes nowhere!’ ”

“I love it when they fall into the basement,” Ogma chuckled. “That’s the best trap we ever made, if I do say so myself!”

“Hey, did we ever clear out the bones from the last guy? That centurion?”

“Ages ago,” Ogma replied. She turned to her sister with a conspiratorial grin. “They won’t suspect a thing. They won’t know what they’re up against until it’s breathing down their necks!”

“You mean *snorting!*” Samra shrieked, emitting a high-pitched peal of laughter.

“Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha!” The laughter of the witches echoed through the room.

CHAPTER 14:

THE LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL



t's right up ahead," Olba observed. As he raised the Port-o-Lant, Agnis and Duan could see that the hallway they were in fed into a larger room.

"Wow." Cringing, Agnis peered at the corners of the dusty ceiling that were illuminated in the bright light of the lantern. "Talk about spider city."

"*How* did you get up to a Level 4 again, Agnis?" Duan teased.

"You are so *mean*!" Agnis' words echoed through the maze of hallways. Suddenly she gasped; she had just thought of something. "Oh no. My trunk!"

"What about it?"

"I left it up in the woods."

"We'll get it later."

"Will you remind me?"

"*No*!" Duan replied, irked. "What am I, your servant? Keep track of your own trunk!"

Agnis sulked. "I don't know why you're being so mean to me."

"I'm not being—"

"It's because I said you were too nice earlier, isn't it?"

"Would you give it a *rest*?" Duan shouted.

"Quiet!" hissed Olba.

Duan and Agnis shut up immediately.

"I thought I heard something," Olba whispered. He listened again for a moment, then looked down at K'nock. The weary snow leopard blinked up at him blankly.

"Oh well." Olba shrugged. "I guess it was nothing. Let's keep moving." He gave Duan and Agnis a warning look. "But do it *quietly*!"

They arrived in the room—another basement space much like the one before, with a high, vaulted ceiling held up by columns. Olba led them to the center of the room. There, in the ceiling, was another chute. The sides were slick and slippery; there was nothing at all to grab onto. And it was a long distance to the top; the opening above was no bigger than a silver dollar.

"How are we supposed to climb this?" Agnis asked dubiously.

"Well, I have a plan," said Olba. He unhooked the other end of the rope from one of the pillars; the thin coil snapped neatly back into the silver disc in his palm. "We take this rope, and we get this little guy," he pointed to Check, "to fly up there with one end of it and attach the rope to something sturdy. Then we use the rope to climb up."

"*That* rope?" Duan blinked in disbelief. "It doesn't even look like it could hold Check!"

"Oh, don't worry. It's much stronger than it looks, trust me!" Olba boasted. "This rope can lift a cow. In fact, it can lift

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three. At least, that's what the ad said. I haven't had a chance to try it myself yet, but I'm sure it will be fine. After all, it has a money-back guarantee!"

The look on the faces of Agnis and Duan told Olba that they did not share his confidence in the rope's advertised ability. He ignored them blithely, motioning to Check. "C'mere, little guy. D'you think you can take this rope up there?"

"Giis?"

"Okay, Check," Duan said with a sigh. "We need you to take this rope, fly up through that hole, and then, when you get to the top, hook it good and tight on something that won't move. Do you think you can do that?"

"Giiss?" The grinia blinked his big black eyes in confusion; he

clearly had trouble following the lengthy explanation.

Duan sighed. *Aaargh. We don't have time for this!* "Take . . . the rope . . ." He tried again, speaking slowly and using hand gestures. "Then fly . . . fly?" He flapped his arms. "Up there." He pointed to the top of the chute. "Then . . . when you get there—"

A loud crash drowned out the rest of his words. The sound seemed to be coming from the end of the hallway. The group froze. This time, *everyone* heard it.

There was another crashing sound, then several more, in quick succession. Earth-shaking footsteps boomed down

the hallway. Something was advancing toward them, fast—and whatever it was, it was big!

“Grrrr . . .” Baring his teeth, K’nock crossed in front of Agnis protectively. Olba and Duan, laying their hands on their swords, peered into the darkness beyond the reach of light from the Port-o-Lant.

The footsteps ceased for a moment; the creature seemed to have stopped at the end of the hall. They could hear it breathing, the heavy breath of some kind of beast.

“Hurrr . . . hurrr . . . hurrr . . .”

“Danger! Danger! Giiis!” The grinia’s panicky shrieks broke the awful silence.

“Dammit, Check! Shut up!” Olba struck Check’s head lightly and the abashed grinia retreated in silence.

“Huurrrr?” The thing snorted, and then the footsteps started again. It was coming straight for them. As the outlines of the creature emerged from the darkness, Olba groaned.

“Oh crap,” he said. “Not *this* guy . . .”

They saw the hoof first. A gigantic hoof, covered with snarled, shaggy hair. Then, as the creature stepped forward into the light, a pair of enormous horns came into view.

Hunching its hulky shoulders to get through the door, the creature stepped into the room, then stood up at its full height. It looked to be over ten feet tall. It had the torso and arms of a man, but the head, legs, and hooves of a bull!

“A minotaur,” Duan breathed, almost to himself.

“RAAAA-UUGGGH!” The beast lifted a huge axe and let out a threatening bellow.

“This just keeps getting better,” Olba muttered.

The minotaur had two imposing horns on its forehead and filthy, scraggly hair that resembled boar’s bristles. There was no sign of intelligence in the red, bloodshot eyes that

blinked at the heroes. Its grotesque snout glistened wetly as the creature snorted and pawed the ground with its hooves.

Beneath the heavy bull's head, the broad chest of a man rippled impressively, covered with a pelt of bristly hair. Its huge arms appeared to be muscled with steel cable. Finally, beneath its waist, the creature walked on the hairy, bowed legs of bull and had a long bull's tail, which whipped its flanks.

"Ugh, that's just gross," said Agnis, wrinkling her nose.

"Bruaaa-aaagh!" The minotaur huffed through its nose, tossing its tail to one side as if flicking away a fly. It grasped the axe in its hands, looking at the group of travelers. "Hurrr . . ."

The tiny eyes blinked with confusion. Although it was big, the creature was really rather stupid.

"Eeeasy, big guy," Olba said softly. He backed slowly away and with unhurried movements handed the hooked end of the rope to Check.

"No change of plan," he whispered. "Check, take the rope. Go. *Now!*"

"Gii!" Check flew up the drain shaft as fast as his little wings could carry him.

The minotaur caught sight of him and looked befuddled for a moment by the tiny creature. "Hurrr?"

"We're going to climb up the rope with *that* thing standing there?" Duan whispered.

"You see any other way out of here?" Olba hissed back. "Go on, make sure he attaches it at the top!"

"O-okay." Duan stood at the bottom of the hole, uncoiling the rope and watching as the baby grinia fluttered toward the top of the drain. Agnis, beside him, shook fitfully. She had her arms around K'nock's neck.

"Grrrr . . ." The snow leopard let out a low growl from the back of his throat, tensing his body for a mighty leap.

Agnis held him back desperately. "No, K'nock!" she whispered. "You can't! You're still too weak from the last battle!"

Hearing the whispers, the minotaur tilted its head to observe them. It blinked its dull eyes and fixed on something it could see clearly: Agnis' red hair. "HUURGH HH!"

Without warning, the beast charged forward, raising its axe. The enclosed space was suddenly in pandemonium. Everyone screamed and scattered to avoid the swing of the giant blade. It struck one of the pillars with an ear-shattering crash, taking a big chunk with it. Bits of plaster rained down from the ceiling.

"GRAAAAH!" The minotaur raised the axe for another blow and caught sight of red hair moving along a far wall. It charged at Agnis once again.

"Aaaaah!" Agnis closed her eyes and raised her hands in front of her face—and in that moment, K'nock leapt toward the Minotaur.

"No, no, K'nock—don't!" Agnis screamed.

"Run, Agnis, run!" Duan called out, his heart rising in his throat.

In all the noise, no one heard the faint cries from far above their heads. "Giii! Rope tied! Giii!"

Finally, Olba heard the grinia. "Duan!" he called. "It's ready! You go first. You can pull Agnis up next. Leave my rucksack. I'll bring it myself!"

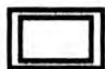
Duan nodded. He wrapped the rope twice around his arm and, taking a deep breath, started shimmying up as quickly as he was able.

"Duan, giis! Go, Duan!" High above, he could see Check fluttering at the top of the drain, cheering him on. Duan was afraid his arms would give out, but the noises from below him

were an extra incentive. He could hear the minotaur battling fiercely with the snow leopard while Agnis screamed at K'nock to stop. He willed himself to pay attention to what he was doing and concentrate on getting to the top.

Come on, Duan, he told himself. If you fall now, you won't be any use to any of them.

At last his boots found a foothold on the slick walls of the chute. Pressing his feet carefully but firmly against the slick surface, he slid them forward step by step while grabbing fresh handfuls of rope. In this way, he hoisted himself upward.



Meanwhile, back in the basement . . .

K'nock had leapt on the minotaur's back and harried it, biting down into the thing's thick neck. He mainly chomped on mouthfuls of rank hair but still it succeeded in distracting the beast from Agnis.

The minotaur lurched back and forth, roaring with frustration and tossing its head, trying to shake the big cat off.

"Will you please *do* something?" Agnis begged Olba, tears of frustration forming at the corners of her eyes.

Olba kept his attention focused on the rope. "I *am* doing something," he said, peering up the narrow shaft. "Well, I'll be damned," he murmured. "The kid made it to the top!"

With shaking arms, Duan hauled his exhausted body over the edge of the hole. He breathed heavily.

Check fluttered around his head excitedly. "Heal spell?"

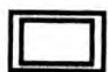
"Better save it," Duan said, catching his breath. "One of the others might need it."

He'd had safely emerged inside the back courtyard, thanks in part to Check, who had wrapped the rope twice around a tree and firmly secured it with the hook.

“Well done, Check!” Duan said, genuinely impressed.

The baby grinia pushed out his tiny chest with pride. “Giis!”

Duan leaned over the edge of the hole. “Hey, I’m ready!” he shouted. “You can send Agnis up now!” There was no reply. Concerned, he shouted down again. “Agnis?”



Agnis wasn’t listening. She was watching K’nock battle with the minotaur . . . and the snow leopard appeared to be losing the fight.

With a great heave, the man-bull threw K’nock forward, off its shoulders. The big cat hurtled awkwardly through the air and struck a pillar. Twisting in mid-air, K’nock managed to land on his feet, but the impact slowed him considerably. He barely dodged another blow from the minotaur’s axe.

“Agnis!” Olba held the rope and shouted to her, motioning for her to hurry. “Duan is ready! We haven’t got much time!”

“No!” Agnis’ eyes burned with fury. “I can’t just leave him behind like this! I’ll burn that monster to cinders before I—”

“Shut up!” Olba shouted. This seemed to get Agnis’ attention; her mouth dropped open. “You’d be more help if you just climbed the damn rope,” Olba continued. “If you’re worried about the snow leopard, leave now and wait patiently at the top!”

“Shut up?” Agnis was outraged. “How dare you speak to me that w—”

“Dammit, I don’t have time for this!” Olba strode over to Agnis and threw her over one shoulder. He turned and started marching back to the rope.

Agnis screamed and kicked. “Stop it! Let me go!”

"You're going up that rope even if I have to tie you up first!" Olba shouted.

"Let me down or I'll—*ooooh!*" Squeezing her eyes shut, Agnis started chanting.

Reaching the rope, Olba stopped abruptly, as if he'd just remembered something. He casually put a hand over Agnis' mouth to stop her chanting.

"If I have to . . . I will *tie you up*." He repeated the words slowly, as if to himself. Then he put Agnis down on the ground.

"Wha-ih-ih?" Agnis asked, her voice muffled behind his hand.

"Wait here." Reaching over to the silver disc at the end of the rope, he picked it up, wound the rope around his long sword, and cut right through it.

Above, Duan felt the rope stiffen and peered down into the vault. "Hey, what's happening? Is Agnis coming up?"

"I'll explain later," Olba yelled up to him. "Just stay where you are." Taking the rope he had just severed, and holding the silver disc under his left arm, he spun out a length of rope.

"What are you—?" Agnis started to ask.

"Stay *right here*," Olba interrupted her. "Don't move an inch. And no magic! That's an order!"

"But K'nock . . ."

"Leave the leopard to me." Running over to the damaged column, Olba picked up a large chunk of rock and tied it to the end of the rope.

"Hey, K'nock," he shouted, positioning himself behind the minotaur. "You're doing great. Just keep Old Bully there distracted for a few more seconds."

K'nock didn't seem to need much encouragement. He lead the minotaur as far away from Agnis as possible. The

monster gave chase and didn't seem to notice the nimble fighter sneaking up behind him. Taking careful aim, Olba swung the rock at the end of the rope back and forth a few times, building up momentum, then let fly.

The rope arced across the room and caught on the beast's horns. The rock swung around them a few times, then smacked into the minotaur's forehead.

"Huurr?" The creature swiveled its head from side to side, trying to find the source of the blow. Each time it turned its head, the rock dealt it another blow, further enraging and confusing it.

As K'nock kept the brute distracted, Olba ran between the pillars of the room, letting out more and more of the Coily Coily Rope.

By the time the minotaur realized the trouble it was in, it was too late. Snorting in outrage, it thrashed about violently, but the more it struggled, the more deeply it became entwined in the lengths of rope, until it was completely twisted up, caught like an insect in a spider web. Both its hooves were off the ground, and the hand grasping the axe was so entangled that the beast could barely shake it. It howled in rage.

"Hey, Hornhead!" Olba yelled. The monster turned and tried to focus its swimming eyes on the fighter, who stood there, grinning, another big chunk of rock in his hand.

"Hurr?"

Olba hurled the rock; it caught the minotaur directly between the eyes. *Thwonk!*

"Guhhrr . . ." The minotaur's eyes rolled back in its head and its body sagged in the web of ropes, unconscious.

Laughing, Olba cut the other end of the rope loose from the silver disc and tied it securely to one of the pillars. "Well, that should hold him for a while. I guess the ad for that rope

was right." He bounced the silver disc in his hand and grinned. "It really *does* hold three cows!"

"Aren't you going to kill him?" Agnis asked.

"While he's tied up and unconscious?" Olba looked offended. "Of course not. That would be unsportsmanlike."

Agnis looked like she was about to say something more, but just then, K'nock came limping out from behind a pillar.

"Mrrrow . . ."

"K'nock!" Agnis ran toward the snow leopard with open arms and knelt down beside him. "Are you all right?"

"Mmmwrr." The exhausted cat raised its eyes to Agnis and licked her face. Agnis laughed with relief.

"Hey, what's going on?" Duan's voice echoed down from above. "Are you guys okay?"

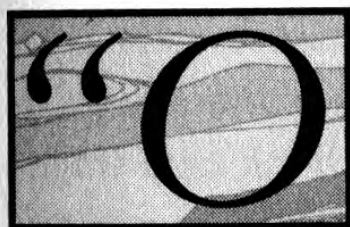
"Everyone's fine," Olba shouted back. "We're coming up. Get ready!"

"Standing by to pull. Just give the word!"

Olba looked back down at Agnis, who nuzzled K'nock. "Okay, Princess," he said softly. "The time for a tearful reunion is over. Whaddaya say we go pay a visit to those two wicked witches?"

CHAPTER 15:

ANOTHER SPIDER HOTEL



kay,” said Olba, “on the count of three. One . . .”

Grasping the Coily Coily Rope with blistered hands, Agnis, Duan, and Olba took deep breaths, braced themselves, and got ready for one final heave. They’d been working steadily for more than ten minutes now and were just about exhausted.

After Duan had pulled Agnis to the surface, he’d sent the rope back down to Olba, who’d tied their backpacks to the end. Duan and Agnis had hauled up that load, unknotted the packs, and lowered the rope again. Then Olba had looped it around the injured snow leopard, making a sturdy harness. After testing it briefly, he shimmied up the rope, hand over hand. Upon reaching the top, he’d rested for only a moment before joining the others in hauling K’nock to the surface. It had been slow going; the big cat weighed more than all three

of them put together, with Check and the baggage thrown in for good measure. But at last they were nearly done. One more heave should bring K'nock all the way up.

"Two . . ."

Check flew nervously around their heads, crying out encouragement. "Gi-iis!"

"Did he say 'three'?" Agnis looked up, confused by the grinia's squawking.

"Quiet, Check!" Duan growled, wincing as the rope bit into his palms.

"*Three!*" On Olba's command, they pulled with all their strength. The rope inched upward, revealing tufted white ears, glowing yellow eyes, long whiskers, and a mouth full of sharp teeth that was open in a silent snarl.

"Almost . . . there," gasped Olba. "Just . . . a . . . little . . . more."

Wriggling in discomfort from where the harness dug in under his limbs, K'nock finally managed to hook one huge paw, then the other, over the edge of the drainage chute. Adding his strength to that of the others, he scrabbled out and onto the grass, where he lay down at once, panting.

Agnis threw herself down beside him and wrapped her arms around his neck. "I love you, K'nock, but as soon as this is over, you're going on a diet!"

The weary snow leopard licked her face.

Duan rested on the ground, his back against the pile of packs and bags. Check fanned him with his wings.

Olba undid K'nock's harness and stowed the Coily Coily Rope back in his pack. "Okay," he said, only then pausing to wipe the sweat from his brow, "enough lazing around. We better get inside."

Agnis and Duan looked at him in disbelief.

“You have *got* to be kidding!” said Agnis.

“Aren’t you tired at all?” asked Duan.

“Sure, I’m tired. But in case you’ve forgotten, that griffin is still wandering around here somewhere. *He’s* not tired; I guarantee you that. Just hungry.”

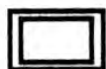
With that, Olba strode purposefully toward the back door of the witches’ mansion. “And don’t forget the bags!” he called to Duan over his shoulder.

Duan groaned but sat up. He watched Olba in amazement; the fighter seemed to have completely recovered his strength already.

Man, he’s not only strong as an ox: he’s got the stamina of one too, Duan thought enviously as he stood up and gathered the backpacks, wincing as his strained muscles protested. *No wonder he’s already Level 13!*

Duan looked down at his own scrawny arms and sighed. By the same token, it was no wonder that he was still stuck at Level 2. He began to feel like he would always be stuck. He felt a pat on his shoulder and looked up. It was Agnis, grinning at him.

“Come on,” she said. “We can’t let Olba hog all the glory.”



Olba had been right—the hole they had just crawled out of had brought them up inside the magic barrier that surrounded the mansion like an invisible wall, and now they were able to walk right up to the back door without a problem.

Now at dusk, the mansion was downright creepy. In fact, it looked deserted. Not even a glimmer of light shone from behind any of the dusty windows. But Duan reminded himself that appearances could be deceiving—especially where the twin witches were concerned.

The door was covered in peeling white paint. The wood underneath appeared all but rotten. It looked as though, at one time, it might have been a servant's entrance, but Duan doubted it had been used in years.

"No lock," he observed, studying the door.

"Yeah," Olba said, "but the front door wasn't locked either, and we still couldn't get in. When you've got magic, you don't need locks. Well, there's only one way to find out. Stand back." He took a step back himself and lowered one shoulder.

"Wait!" cried Agnis, blocking his way with her staff.

"Now what?" Olba turned to her angrily. "You're cramping my style, Princess!"

"You can't just break it down," she answered, not backing down. K'nock stood at her side, fur bristling. "The witches will hear—we'll lose the element of surprise!"

"I got news for you," Olba said. "We already lost it. Or have you forgotten who set that griffin on us . . . not to mention the minotaur!"

As the two of them argued, Duan stepped forward, placed his hand on the knob of the door, and cautiously turned it. He heard a click, then pushed the door open. It creaked on rusty hinges. "Um, guys . . ."

"Stay out of this, Duan," said Olba, without so much as a glance in his direction.

"And another thing," said Agnis. "It's awful the way you order that boy around! I think—"

"Guys!"

"What?" cried Olba and Agnis in unison. They turned to face him. Their jaws dropped as they registered that the door was open.

"Problem solved," said Duan smugly.

Agnis laughed, jabbing Olba in the arm with her elbow. "I guess it's brains over brawn, eh, big guy?"

Olba winced, then made an exaggerated bow, sweeping an arm toward the doorway. "After you, Duan."

Duan hesitated, peering nervously into the darkness inside. "Um . . ."

Check, curious as ever, fluttered over to poke his head in. "Eeep!" The baby grinia pulled back sharply and sneezed. "Stinks!"

"Check's right," said Duan, taking a sniff himself. "Ugh. It smells like mold." He waved the smell away with one hand as he held his nose with the other. "Pee-eeew."

"If you're done complaining, let's shed a little light on the situation." Olba, who had retrieved the Port-o-Lant, pushed past Duan and stepped through the door.

Agnis and Duan glanced at each other, shrugged, and followed him inside; remembering the griffin, Duan closed the door behind him.

The first thing they saw once their eyes adjusted to the artificial light was a stone floor, and the second was an oven. A large table stood in the middle of the room; its heavy wooden top seemed to be used for cutting. In the corner was a round sink. A thick layer of dust covered everything. And not only dust . . .

"Great," Agnis grumbled. "Just what I needed: another spider hotel!" And in fact there were spider webs everywhere.

"Sheesh," said Olba. "You all whine more than a bunch of old grandmothers. I guess that's what I get for hooking up with amateurs."

Before another argument could begin, Duan, who had gone to examine the oven, exclaimed: "Hey, check it out: this thing's a real antique! It's got to be over a hundred years old."

"Looks like it hasn't been used for about that long, either," Olba commented, waving cobwebs away as he stepped over to the table. He blew on the tabletop, and a cloud of dust rose up in the Port-o-Lant's light, causing Check, who had perched on Olba's shoulder for a closer view, to sneeze loudly.

Duan leaned down and opened the oven door. "No, I don't think so," he said.

"Don't think so—what?" asked Olba.

"Look." He ran a hand along the bottom of the oven, then showed the others his fingers, black with soot. "Somebody has used this oven recently. The ashes are still fresh."

"But why would a kitchen that's recently been used be covered with dust and spider webs?" asked Agnis, one hand resting lightly on K'nock's head. "These webs can't have formed in just a day or two. There're too many—unless about a million spiders are hiding here!" She cringed as she said this; the webs gave her the creeps.

"It's probably some kind of magic the witches cast," Duan said a little nervously; Agnis started to get that look again, the one she got just before she let loose with one of her high-level Fire spells. "You know, a spell to make it look like the house is empty, deserted."

The twin witches, spying on the adventurers through the magic hand mirror in their room at the top of the mansion, cackled excitedly at what Duan had said.

"Eeee! Ha ha ha! Exactly right!" squealed Samra.

"Oh, he's so smart!" Ogma gushed, stroking the frame of the mirror with her purple-nailed fingers. "And handsome!"

"It's going to take more than smarts to make it past our traps," Samra countered, snatching the mirror from her sister's grasp. "It's going to take strength. The kind of strength Olba has! Why, he practically pulled that snow leopard up all by

himself. Did you notice how his muscles bulged? Oooh, let's do a replay! I want to watch that part again, in slow motion!"

Ogma snatched the mirror right back. "This is no time for you to start panting over your he-man," she said. "I want to see what they do next!"

"Oh, all right." Samra shivered with excitement and leaned toward the mirror in her sister's hands. "Do you think they'll make it past our traps and get all the way up here?"

"What if they do? That wouldn't be so bad, would it?"

"Oh no . . . not at all!"

The two sisters shrieked with laughter.

As their laughter echoed through the room at the top of the mansion, the adventurers continued to poke around the kitchen. Wrinkling her nose and trying to avoid the cobwebs, Agnis opened up one of the cupboards and gingerly peered inside.

"Hmph," she snorted. "Do these witches eat *food*? I mean, for a kitchen that's supposedly been used recently, you'd think there'd be more—AAAAAH!"

"What?" cried Olba and Duan in unison as Check, squawking, flapped about wildly.

Agnis, who had recoiled from the cupboard, pointed into its depths with a trembling finger. "S-s-something over there is m-m-moving . . ."

CHARACTER FILE

Identical twin sorceresses living deep in the Witches' Forest. Although most of the Adventurers who set out to face Ogma and Samra are never seen again, the two sisters lose their cool when it comes to good-looking men and have been known to dole out their treasure generously in the case of particularly handsome or hunky specimens.

They are at least two hundred years old, but their magic gives them the youthful appearance of twenty-year-olds. They have long eyelashes, full lips, and seductive bodies, but they go overboard when it comes to perfume, using combinations of scents that make them smell awful!

Ogma: the eldest, loves purple. She prefers handsome boys like Duan and, being the older sister, is cool-tempered. But when she gets angry, watch out!

Samra: the younger sister, adores pink. She likes hunkier guys like Olba and is far more short-tempered than Ogma, often throwing hysterical fits.

The others peered dubiously into the cupboard. Sure enough, there was a blob of blue, yellow, and orange fur lurking in a corner. Whatever it was, it kept trying to get away—they heard a frantic scratching sound as it attempted to burrow its way out of the cupboard with its long, sharp claws.

“Oh, no you don’t.” Olba reached in, grabbed a handful of fur, and hauled the creature out. It uttered a sharp cry and flailed pitifully in his grasp.

The thing was about a foot tall and shaped like a furry bush. It had a kind of blue mane, and the rest of its body was lemon-yellow . . . except for its claws and the top of its head, which were shockingly orange. The weirdest thing about it was its single eye, which looked like a marble placed in the middle of a yellow carpet.

“That looks like a peculese,” said Agnis, “except for the colors. Peculese are brown, aren’t they?”

“In the wild, but this one is a pet. Its fur has been dyed.” Olba leaned in for a closer look, only to pull back quickly, holding his arm out to put as much distance between the squirming monster and his nose as possible. “Man, does it stink! Doesn’t anything smell good around this place?”

The stench was horrid.

The peculese smelled like it had been doused in perfume, the kind of sickeningly sweet perfume that numbs the brain and turns the stomach. Even Check, for all his curiosity, would not come too close.

As soon as the diminutive monster realized it was the center of attention, it began to freak out. Shivering, the creature gazed at its captors, its single eye rolling wildly about, as if it might roll right off its furry face.

“Aw, poor little thing,” said Duan. “It seems to be quite tame. It’s just frightened . . .”

Olba made a rude sound. "Pfft. Go on, get your sword and do away with it, Duan. We can roast it and have it for dinner."

Duan's mouth dropped open. "You're kidding, right? I'm not going to kill a defenseless little creature. Why, just look at it! It's harmless!"

"You're never going to get anywhere with that boy-scout attitude of yours, kid," sneered Olba. "A monster is a monster, and the only good monster is a dead monster."

"Yeah? Well, grinnias and snow leopards are in the Monster Encyclopedia, so I guess that makes Check and K'nock monsters too. Are you gonna kill them?"

"Eeep?" Check's little face looked stricken.

"Grrr!" K'nock didn't look too happy either.

"Hey, I'm just making a point," Duan said. "Olba's not going to hurt you."

"I'd like to see him try," said Agnis, gripping her staff tightly as she glared at Olba.

Olba just grinned and held the peculese out toward Duan. "C'mon, kid, it's a step up from slimes. Every experience point counts! If you want to level up, you're going to have to—OW!"

Olba suddenly roared in pain as the peculese, still in his grasp, managed to scratch him with its sharp claws. With a yelp, Olba dropped the monster on the floor, where it promptly scurried away, vanishing into a hole in one of the walls.

Duan and Agnis were in fits of giggles over the fighter's comeuppance. Olba glared at them, trying to regain some dignity.

" 'Defenseless,' huh?" he growled. " 'Harmless,' huh? Why, if I ever see that little—"

"I'm sure it's nothing you can't handle, Olba," said Duan, and then broke into laughter again.

“Yeah, well. We couldn’t have eaten it anyway.” Olba shouted a parting insult toward the hole into which the peculese had disappeared: “It smelled too bad!”

“Hey, speaking of eating . . .” Duan opened up a few more cabinets and began rummaging around inside. “Is anybody else tired of dried meat and crackers?”

“Well, yes,” Olba admitted, raising an eyebrow. “But what else is there?”

Beaming, Duan reached into the back of one of the cabinets and pulled out a box of flour. “Who wants pancakes?”



“You really are a genius when it comes to food, Duan, you know that?” Olba pushed back his empty plate and leaned away from the table, patting his full belly appreciatively. “How do you make so much with so little?”

“Yeah. This savory pancake with greens—it’s delicious!” Agnis helped herself to another one of the steaming thin pancakes.

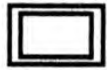
Duan smiled. “Oh, it’s nothing really . . . I picked the greens earlier. They’re called *libi* leaves. If we had some dried shrimp, it really would have been great.”

Agnis waved away his modesty. “They’re great now! A man who can do all that with some leaves and a little flour—you can cook for me any time!”

“Giis!” Check nodded, tucking into his own pancake. K’nock looked far less appreciative; the hungry snow leopard sniffed around the edge of the pancake Agnis had placed before him and finally nibbled the edge suspiciously.

“Aw . . .” Seeing the look of admiration on Agnis’ face, Duan started blushing furiously; he turned away, hoping she wouldn’t notice. “I guess I’ll start washing up.”

"I'll help!" Agnis volunteered. Olba put his feet up on the table. "Have fun you guys," he said. "I'll be resting up for the *real* work."



"Hmph!" Ogma furrowed her brows in annoyance as she gazed into the magic hand mirror, watching the fighter lounging at the table. "Look at him, the big, lazy lug! Making himself right at home!"

"Oh, Ogma," Samra chided. "There's no reason to get upset."

"Are you kidding? Look at them—tromping around my kitchen like they owned the place!"

"Well, it's not exactly their fault, is it?"

"What do you mean?"

Samra sighed. "We *did* cast a spell, remember?"

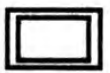
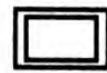
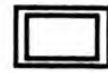
"But we cast so many." Ogma pouted. "I can't be expected to remember them all!"

"We do cast quite a lot of spells, don't we?" Samra giggled. "And they're all so fiendishly clever! But Ogma, dear, you really should remember *this* spell. After all, it was *your* idea!"

"It was?"

"Of course it was!" To be honest, Samra didn't remember whose idea it had been, but she wanted to coax her sister out of her gloomy mood before it spoiled their fun. "You thought it would be amusing to scatter low-level confusion spells all through the mansion! So that in addition to the deadly spells

DUAN'S RECIPES



LIBI LEAVES PANCAKE

1. Grind some libi leaves.
2. Mix the ground leaves with a little water, add some wheat flour, then knead.
3. Roll the dough out.
4. Fry it!

You can add salt, red ginger, or even dried shrimp to make it tastier!

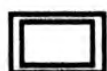
we've set up to kill adventurers crazy enough to come after our treasure, the usual tricks and traps, there are other spells that don't kill . . . at least, not right away. Spells that, when triggered, cause the victims to lose track of where they are and what they're supposed to be doing."

"Now I remember!" cried Ogma, clapping her hands excitedly. "Oh, it *was* clever of me, wasn't it? A group of adventurers come into the mansion, all set on stealing our treasure and maybe even killing us too, but instead they trigger a confusion spell, and before you know it, they've forgotten all about their mission and are sweeping the floor, rearranging the furniture, even cooking dinner and washing up afterward! Ha ha ha! Just look at them, the saps!"

"Not only that," said Samra, "but it gives us time to prepare other spells. More—how shall I put it?—*straightforward* spells." As she spoke, Samra caressed a wooden doll with her long, glittery pink fingernails. The doll was a marionette roughly in the shape of a dog.

Seeing this, Ogma let out an unnerving, high-pitched laugh.

"Hee hee! Oh yes, that's a nice one. I'll make one too. The more, the merrier!"



While Duan washed, Agnis found a dishcloth and started drying. Check buzzed around their heads, taking the clean plates from Agnis and putting them back in the cupboard. K'nock, still resting from his injuries, slept comfortably under the table.

Olba cleaned a plate too: his own. After polishing off the last of the pancakes, he let out a huge burp, then put a thin cigar between his teeth.

"Hurry, guys," he grumbled. "We don't have all day."

"Oh, be quiet," Agnis chided. "You'll at least have time for your *smoke*." She rolled her eyes and went back to drying dishes.

"I'm not smoking it," Olba replied, irked.

Agnis, turning around with one raised eyebrow, realized that this was true: Olba had the cigar in his mouth, but he made no move to light it. With a puzzled expression, she asked, "Then why do you have it in your mouth?"

"Yeah," Duan chimed in. "What's up with that?"

"It's none of your business," Olba replied sulkily. "Jeez, can't a guy relax for a minute without you two asking a bunch of questions? Leave it alone."

"You could go outside if you wanted to—"

"I said, leave it alone!" Olba snapped. Agnis, taken aback by his outburst, blinked, then shrugged. She went back to helping Duan with the tidying up.

The truth was, Olba had decided to quit smoking right after the fight with the minotaur. It wasn't the first time he'd vowed to quit, but he'd never been able to follow through. He always lasted a day or two, then broke down. But this time would be different. It had to be. Because after dashing around the minotaur a few times with the Coily Coily Rope, he'd actually started wheezing!

"That's it," he said to himself, appalled. "No more of these damn cigars." Besides, he had heard rumors that smoking reduced your strength, and that was the last thing a fighter needed. So the battle with the minotaur had been a wake-up call. Not that he ever would have admitted it to Duan or Agnis—those two kids would mock him mercilessly if he confessed to any weakness.

Yet despite his resolve, he still craved cigars. Just holding one between his lips was a comfort, even if he didn't light it.

But now that Duan and Agnis had noticed, he felt foolish. He tossed it away, embarrassed. "Okay," he said, "I'm ready. Let's go."

"Just a minute," said Agnis, drying another dish.

Olba shot to his feet so suddenly that he sent his chair flying. "Hey, what the heck are we doing?"

"Washing up," said Agnis. "It's only polite! And pick up that chair!"

"Oh, right. Sorry." Olba actually started toward the overturned chair, then stopped abruptly. "Wait a minute! What do you mean, *polite*? We're here to kill these witches and steal their treasure, aren't we? What's polite got to do with it?"

There was a crash as Duan let the plate he was washing drop to the kitchen floor. "It's a spell!" he said. "It's gotta be a spell!"

"Those damn witches are probably watching us and laughing themselves silly right now!" growled Olba. "Oooh, when I catch up to them, I'll . . . Come on, let's get out of here. We've wasted enough time!"

Duan put on his backpack and reached to grab Olba's, but the fighter took it himself, slipping it over his broad shoulders. "You're gonna need your hands free, kid," he said.

There were two doors leading out of the kitchen: a large central double door, made of heavy dark wood, and a smaller door to its right. Duan opened the smaller one and brushed aside some cobwebs.

"Hey, look. There's a pantry over here. We could've had potatoes!" He pulled out a fist-sized potato and threw it to Agnis.

"Ew!" Agnis expertly deflected the potato with her staff. "Get that moldy thing away from me!"

"Anything else in there?" asked Olba.

"Some weird looking jars."

"Leave them alone," Olba commanded. "We don't want to trigger another spell; the next one might be deadly. Let's try this double door." He examined it carefully from all sides.

"What are you doing?" demanded Agnis. "I thought you didn't want to waste any more time!"

"Checking for traps," said Olba. "Those witches aren't going to catch me again."

"Do you see any?" asked Duan.

"No," said Olba. "Here goes nothing . . ."

The heavy double-door creaked open at his touch.

They advanced into the next room. It was a grand dining room, with a large table and upholstered chairs and a high, vaulted ceiling. Like the kitchen, it was covered in spider webs and dust and looked as though it hadn't been used in years.

Duan looked closer at the chairs and the floor. "Just as I thought," he told the others. "Under all the dust, the floor has been polished regularly, and these chairs were recently reupholstered."

"You know, there's some fine stuff here," Olba mused as he strolled about the room. He picked up a silver candelabra resting upon a sideboard and studied it closely. "Nice workmanship. If it wasn't so heavy, it'd be worth taking." He let it drop to the floor.

Agnis' eyebrows shot up. "Worth *taking*?" she repeated, in such an icy tone of voice that Duan and Check glanced at each other nervously—*uh-oh, here it comes*. "What are you, Olba, a common thief? We're here to deal out some justice to evildoers, not steal their silverware!"

Olba bristled. "Well excuse me, your Highness, for being too *common*. You seem to think that we're on some kind of

righteous crusade or something. I got news for you, sweetheart, adventuring is a business—and not always a pretty one. If you think about it, what we're really doing is breaking and entering, trying to kill a couple of women, and steal their stuff."

Olba growled out this retort in a single breath and his intensity caught Agnis by surprise. For a moment, she stood looking at him with her mouth open, her eyes wide as saucers. But she couldn't bear to lose.

"They're not women, they're witches," she said, flushing red with anger. "And in case you've forgotten, they've already tried to kill us more times than I care to think about."

"Yeah? Then what's the big deal about taking their stuff? That's how you're supposed to be paying me, in case *you've* forgotten!"

Agnis drew herself up tall and sniffed, looking every inch the princess. "You may be a mercenary, but that doesn't mean everything's relative. There's a difference between right and wrong!"

"And just where does frying helpless slimes fit into your morality?" Olba shot back.

Agnis' eyes filled with tears. "Maybe you'd feel a bit different," she said shakily, "if the witches had put a curse on *your* mother."

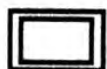
Duan watched anxiously as Agnis and Olba argued; so did Check, perched on his shoulder. Neither one of them liked this one bit. Nor did K'nock, who eyed Olba warily. When Agnis started crying, the snow leopard growled in the back of his throat, rubbing protectively against his mistress' leg.

Olba, seeing the effect of his words, immediately regretted them. "Hey, I-I'm sorry, kid. Let's not quarrel, eh? Anyway, it's probably a spell—you know, to make us snap at one another for the amusement of the witches!"

Agnis wiped away her tears. "Yes, I agree. I'm sorry too." She smiled and extended her hand to Olba.

As they shook hands, Duan and Check glanced at each other with sighs of relief. "Man, if that's what Olba's like when he's not smoking," Duan whispered, "I wish he'd start up again!"

"Gii!" Check chirped in agreement.



Pushing aside the doors on the opposite side of the dining room, the group found themselves in a long carpeted hallway. Like everything else in the mansion, the carpet was covered in dust. Spider webs hung from the corners of the high ceiling. An ornate crystal chandelier hung there as well, glittering in the light from Olba's Port-o-Lant. Directly across the hall was another set of doors. To the right, at what seemed to be one end of the hall, they could make out a double staircase spiraling up to the second floor. To the left, the hall extended past the chandelier and intersected with what appeared to be another corridor. What lay beyond was cloaked in shadow.

"You guys wait here," Olba said in a whisper. "I'm going to scout ahead."

"But you've got the only light," said Agnis.

"So?" Olba looked at her and raised an eyebrow. "Don't tell me you're afraid of the dark!"

"No . . ."

"Just stay quiet. I'll be right back."

"Check come too!" said the baby grinia, launching himself from Duan's shoulder to flutter around Olba's head.

"Hmm, you might come in handy at that," said the fighter. "Okay, you can come. Only could you try to keep quiet for once?!"

“Not say word!” Check declared stoutly.

“I hope I don’t regret this,” Olba muttered. He set off to the left, followed closely by Check.

Shadows closed in on Duan and Agnis as the Port-o-Lant drew away.

“You’re not really afraid of the dark, are you?” whispered Duan.

“It’s not the dark I’m afraid of,” said Agnis in a small voice as she knelt down beside K’nock and put an arm around his neck. “It’s what’s *in* the dark that bothers me.”

“Can’t you cast some kind of light spell or something?”

“I never really saw the point in learning low-level spells like that.”

“Yeah, well, a Level 10 fireball has its uses, but this isn’t one of them,” Duan pointed out.

“I know,” she said miserably, a sad voice in the darkness.

Suddenly, light flared. Agnis gasped, only to find herself looking up at the smiling face of Duan, who held a burning match in his hand. “I took these from the kitchen,” he said. “I thought they might come in handy.”

“That was smart,” Agnis said admiringly. “That’s what I like about you, Duan. You’re always thinking ahead.”

“Umm . . .” Duan felt as though his face was as hot as the match that nearly burned his fingers. He quickly lit another one, trying desperately to come up with something clever to say. He was still trying when Olba and Check returned, three matches later.

“Find anything?” Duan blurted while they were still a distance off.

The fighter grunted. “That hallway down there runs perpendicular to this one. It’s where we would have entered the mansion if we’d been able to get through the front door. At

one end is a staircase leading back down to the basement. At the other end is a bathroom. I—”

“Did you say *bathroom*?” interrupted Agnis.

“Yeah, a bathroom. So?”

“Is it clean?”

“Clean?” Olba shrugged, scratched his head. “Clean enough, I guess. Why?”

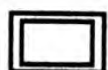
“I thought I might take the opportunity to, um, freshen up a bit.”

“Oh, you mean pee,” said Olba bluntly.

“Can I borrow the Port-o-Lant?”

Olba shrugged again and handed it over. “The bathroom’s right down there, to the left. And don’t take all day, okay?”

“Hmph. Come along, K’nock,” Agnis said, turning on her heel and hurrying down the hallway and around the corner.



Olba groused to Duan by the light of the candelabra Olba had fetched from the dining room. They sat with their backs to the wall, the candelabra set before them on the carpet. “Jeez, traveling with women is such a pain!”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Duan replied brightly. “It keeps things lively, doesn’t it? I think it’s fun having her around.”

“Like girl!” exclaimed Check, who had taken up his accustomed position on Duan’s shoulder. “Like cat!”

“K’nock’s saved our bacon more than once,” Olba admitted. “And Agnis ain’t so bad, I guess—for a princess.”

“Have you noticed anything unusual about this mansion, Olba?” Duan asked.

“What, you mean besides the fact that it could use a good dusting and some fresh air?”

"It's laid out in a perfectly symmetrical way. At least, I think it is. I'll bet those doors over there lead to a room that's the mirror image of the dining room. Do you think that could be significant somehow? I mean, with the witches being twins and all."

"Who knows?" Olba shook his head admiringly. "I'll say one thing for you, Duan—that brain of yours never stops working."

Duan smiled. "That's what Gaeley always used to say!"

"Gaeley? Who's that?"

"My big brother. He's a fighter like you."

"Another fighter, eh? I'd like to meet him."

"I hope you will some day. Only, I don't know where he is. That's why I joined the army. He was a soldier, see . . ."

Duan began to tell Olba about his brother. He missed Gaeley terribly, and it was such a relief to be able to talk about him now that he had forgotten about Agnis. Olba, too, had forgotten about her, chuckling as Duan told him stories about some of the mischief he and Gaeley had gotten into over the years.

But suddenly Check interrupted: "Where girl?"

And it all came crashing back to them: where they were, what they were doing, and the fact that Agnis had been gone an awfully long time.

Cursing, Olba surged to his feet. "Look at us, chatting away like a couple of old ladies! It's another damn spell!"

Duan grabbed the candelabra and hurried down the hall, toward the bathroom. Drawing his sword, Olba followed.

But when they got there, everything seemed normal. K'nock, lying before the door, raised his head and looked at them curiously.

Duan approached the door. "Agnis?" he called.

There was no answer.

Duan set the candelabra down and gave the door a hesitant knock. "Um, Agnis? You okay in there?"

Again, there was no answer. K'nock began to sniff inquisitively at the bottom of the door.

"Do you hear her in there, K'nock?" Duan asked. The snow leopard blinked at him, then growled softly.

"That's it," Olba growled, pulling Duan aside. "I'm going in."

Duan looked troubled. "But what if she—?"

Too late. Olba slammed his shoulder against the door, which flew open with a bang.

Sunlight streamed through the narrow window above the toilet. The Port-o-Lant sat on the edge of the sink.

There was absolutely no sign of Agnis.

Panic rose in Duan's throat. He ran into the bathroom and climbed onto the toilet to check the window, thinking that Agnis might have squeezed through. But it was too narrow, and covered with metal bars besides. He looked out into the surrounding woods, searching for some sign of her.

"See anything?" asked Olba from behind him.

"Nothing." Then it hit him. He turned from the window. "Olba, how long have we been in here?"

"What, in the bathroom?"

"It was evening when we entered the mansion. That means it should be the middle of the night right now. Not . . ." Duan indicated the bright sunlight pouring through the window.

Olba blinked in surprise. "Oh crap."

"It must be another spell," said Duan.

"Yeah, but what kind?" Olba sighed with frustration. "It could just be an illusion. But if it's real, who knows how much time has passed since we've been inside? A few hours? A day? A hundred years? I wouldn't put anything past those witches!"

“But that still doesn’t tell us what happened to Agnis,” Duan said. “I mean, she didn’t just fall into the toilet! Or did she?” Hesitantly, he opened the lid of the toilet and flushed it. Water swirled down the drain.

“It looks normal,” he observed.

Check, who had flown in and started examining everything, ran his small three-toed forepaws across the surface of the clouded mirror. “Gii?” he chirped.

“Good thinking, Check,” said Duan. “Maybe it’s a magic mirror!”

Olba nodded. “Or maybe there’s a secret door—that’s a common trick.”

But the mirror wouldn’t budge, no matter how hard he pushed and pulled. And the glass itself remained solid; if it were magic, there had to be a trigger they hadn’t found. They were left looking at their own troubled reflections in the glass. Frustrated, Olba raised the pommel of his sword, ready to smash the mirror, but Duan grabbed his arm.

“Don’t! If it *is* magic, and if you break the glass, you might trap Agnis wherever it is that she’s been taken!”

Olba lowered the sword with a growl that was echoed by K’nock. “Check the floor,” he commanded. “I’ll check the walls. There’s gotta be a trick here somewhere.”

But the floor and walls were as apparently normal as everything else.

“If only we had a thief in the group,” Olba said, “he could cast a spell to survey the room for traps or traces of magic . . .”

“Giis!” Check perked up hopefully.

Olba turned to Duan. “Can this little guy do a ‘check and see’ spell?”

“Check, can you?” Duan asked.

“Check?” the grinia chirped, confused.

Duan sighed, shaking his head. "He heard his name, that's all. He can't find her."

Duan and Olba looked at each other helplessly. It really seemed there was nothing more they could do. K'nock, standing in the doorway, looked stricken.

Finally, Olba shrugged. "Well, it's gotta be the witches. Come on, let's go." He picked up the Port-o-Lant and turned to exit the bathroom.

"We can't just *leave* her!" said Duan.

K'nock roared his agreement, quickly moving to block Olba's path

"How are we leaving her?" Olba demanded. "She's already gone! The best thing we can do for Agnis is to find the witches. I'm betting that they'll know exactly where she is and how to get her back." Olba stared at the snow leopard. "So if you don't mind . . ."

K'nock stepped sullenly aside to let the fighter pass. Duan cast one last despairing look around the empty bathroom, then followed Olba out. *Now what?* he wondered. *This whole party's falling apart . . .*

"Come on, K'nock, let's go," he said.

But K'nock folded his paws and took up the position of guardian outside the bathroom door. It looked as though the snow leopard would wait there forever, if that were what it took.

"Olba, wait!" Duan called out. "K'nock isn't moving. What should I do?"

"Leave him," Olba replied without looking back.

Duan sighed in frustration. "Okay, K'nock. You wait here. If anything happens, just, uh, roar, I guess."

K'nock ignored him, curling up on the spot, his hypnotically beautiful eyes staring through the open door

and into the empty bathroom as if expecting his mistress to materialize as suddenly as she'd disappeared.

Seeing there was nothing more to be done, and painfully aware that he couldn't see Olba anymore, Duan picked up the candelabra and hurried after the fighter.

As he skidded around the corner, he saw Olba standing before the doors that were situated across the hall from the dining room doors from which they'd exited. The fighter had placed the Port-o-Lant on the floor, examining the doors for traps. Duan slowed to a walk, relieved to see that Olba hadn't disappeared like Agnis. But something was strange. He paused, looking around. It took him a moment to realize that the hall was dark; no sunlight pierced the dusty windows as had been the case in the bathroom. He wasn't quite sure what it meant, but it seemed significant. "Olba," he called. "Have you noticed the—?"

"Look out, kid!" Olba shouted suddenly. He flung himself away from the doors and slammed into Duan, knocking him to the carpet and sending the candelabra flying.

Behind them, with the clang and tinkle of a million crystal pendants, the heavy chandelier came hurtling down from the ceiling, landing with an enormous crash on the exact spot where Duan had been standing.

"Whoa." Duan cradled his head in his hands, looking at the pile of crystal and iron he would have been buried under and imagining the damage he would have sustained if Olba hadn't come to his rescue.

Check, who'd also had a narrow escape, wrapped himself around Duan's neck, shivering. "Giii . . ."

Duan watched speechlessly as the chandelier, now whole and complete, started to rise from the floor and return to its original position, complete with magically restored cobwebs and dust.

“See what I mean about traps,” Olba growled. “I’m sick of being a punching bag. Something tells me those witches are upstairs. Come on, let’s take the fight to them.” He drew his sword and made for the stairs at the far end of the hall.

Duan hurried after him, careful not to pass beneath the chandelier, Check still clinging to his neck. He drew his own sword.

But when they reached the foot of the stairs, they paused. From the shadows of the second-floor landing came ominous sounds of scratching and heavy breathing. Something was up there, waiting.

CHAPTER 16:

AGNIS IN WONDERLAND



hen she reached the bathroom, Agnis opened the door and peered inside, checking to make sure there weren't any spiders. The room was small and tiled with crumbling, checkered marble. An old, clouded mirror hung over the sink, and the toilet was at the back of the room, opposite the door. Above the toilet was a narrow window, a thin rectangle black with night.

"K'nock, you wait out here and guard the door, okay?"

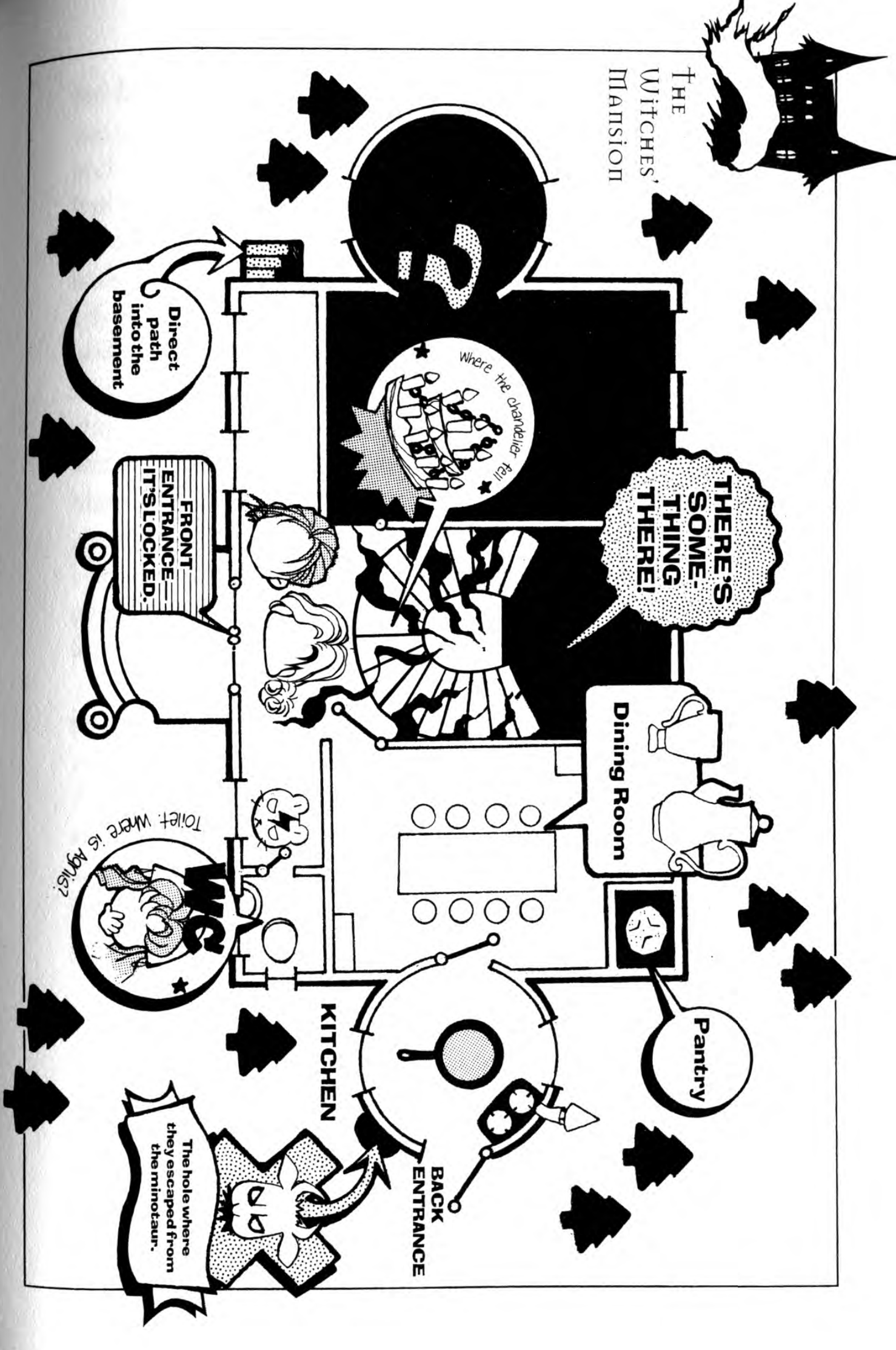
The big snow leopard gave an affirmative growl.

Agnis entered the bathroom, shutting the door behind her. *Finally*, Agnis thought, *an indoor bathroom! Toilet paper! Soap! And . . . please let there be hot water!*

The water that came out of the sink was ice-cold, but it was bracing, and after several days in the woods, the icy, fresh liquid felt good on her face. She looked around for a towel, and noticed, for the first time since entering, how dingy the bathroom appeared in the sunlight.



THE WITCHES' Mansion



THERE'S
SOME-
THING
THERE!

Where the chandelier
fell

Dining Room

Pantry

KITCHEN

BACK
ENTRANCE

Direct
path
into the
basement

FRONT
ENTRANCE
IT'S LOCKED.

Toilet. Where is Agnès?

The hole where
they escaped from
the minotaur.

As she wiped her hands on her mantle, she squinted her eyes and suddenly gasped.

The sunlight?

Standing on tiptoes, she looked out the narrow window above the toilet. Sure enough, afternoon light streamed through the trees outside. She rubbed her eyes, then looked again.

Wait a minute . . . it was evening when we got here. Did we spend that much time eating in the kitchen?

Of course . . . Agnis let out a groan of frustration. How stupid she was, not to have checked for traps when she came into the bathroom! She'd had to go so bad, she hadn't thought of anything else.

If Olba knew, he'd be furious!

She glanced around the room dubiously and gazed down at the toilet. "Well," she said aloud to herself, "I guess there are no monsters down *there* . . ."

With a sigh, she shrugged and began examining her reflection in the foggy mirror.

The face that gazed back at her from the mirror was a far cry from the princess who'd lived in the summer palace back in Fiana. Her porcelain complexion was burnt by the sun, and as for her fiery red hair—was that a *twig* sticking out of it? Dismayed, Agnis combed her fingers through her hair, trying to make herself halfway presentable.

Agnis certainly wasn't used to the life of an adventurer. Although she put on a brave face, this was all new to her. And the ever-present danger—not to mention her anxiety about her mother—began to take its toll on her nerves. She felt lucky that she had joined this party; they odd characters, to be sure, but she was grateful for the company. K'nock was a worthy bodyguard and she loved him dearly, but it wasn't as though

he could joke or chat with her. During the days she'd been traveling alone with him, she'd found herself growing more and more lonely. The only thing that had kept her going was her strong desire to save her mother.

That had changed when she'd met Duan and Olba, and now she felt a different feeling welling up in her: a spirit of adventure. She traveled with friends now. Together, they overcame any obstacles, and because of that she felt happier. More solid, more complete. At the strangest times, as when she and Duan were attacked by the griffin, she had actually felt something close to *joy*, which was odd considering how close she'd come to getting killed, but feelings were feelings and there was no arguing with them. It was as if some long-buried part of her were finally getting a chance to shine—a part of her that hadn't had a chance to emerge when she had lived at the palace.

Although she did her best to hide it by teasing them mercilessly, she liked her new companions. Sure, Duan seemed a bit timid, but his green eyes shone with intelligence and she found that comforting. As for Olba, he was a bit rough, to put it mildly. His speech and manners were coarse, and he had a different set of values than she did. But she knew she could rely on him. He was strong, and he knew what he was doing, and that made her feel safe.

Agnis laughed to herself as she arranged her hair, thinking that Olba was probably complaining about her right now. *Women*, she could practically hear him saying. *They'd live in the bathroom if you let 'em!* She smiled fondly and opened the bathroom door.

"All right, you guys, I'm coming out. I know you're sick of waiting, but a girl's gotta get freshened . . ." She looked around, blinking in surprise. ". . . *up?*" she squeaked.

Olba wasn't there. Duan wasn't there. K'nock wasn't there. In fact, the entire *mansion* wasn't there. Instead, she was looking at a forest that was exactly like the one they had been trudging through for days now. Thick ivy entwined the trees, and the sunlight filtered through the branches, exactly as before.

"Huh?" Agnis looked around wildly, turning this way and that. How could she be back in the forest? Was it even the same forest? There was no way to tell—it extended in every direction as far as she could see.

Without thinking clearly, she stepped forward, out of the bathroom—almost in a daze—that is until the door slammed shut behind her. She whirled around. The door floated there in midair, all by itself, right in the middle of the forest. Agnis shut her eyes, shook her head to clear it, then opened her eyes again. Nope, she was still in the forest. And the door was still there, suspended in the air.

"No, no, no, this isn't happening." Suddenly Agnis gasped. "My staff!"

She'd left it in the bathroom! Agnis could see it just as she remembered it, propped against the sink while she had used the facilities. A moan escaped from her lips: what if she couldn't get back in? Without her staff, without K'nock, she was helpless.

Agnis took a deep, calming breath. *Okay. Don't panic. It's not real. It's just a trick, a spell of some kind.*

Circling around cautiously to the back of the door, she saw: the other side of the door. She returned to the front and, terrified that the door would vanish the instant she touched it but even more terrified that it could vanish at any time even if she didn't, she put her hand on the doorknob.

Nothing happened. She turned the knob.

It's not locked. So far, so good. Expecting the worst, Agnis took a deep breath and opened the door.

The bathroom was just as she'd left it.

With a triumphant shout, she ran inside and slammed the door behind her. She grabbed her staff, hugging it close. *I'm back*, she thought with a shudder of relief. *That was a close call!* To be stuck out there in the forest, all alone . . . Agnis shuddered again. From now on, she would stick close to the others. She couldn't wait to see them, even Olba. And dear, faithful K'nock! She flung open the door in her eagerness—and found herself gazing out into the forest. She heard the hum and whine of insects, and rustlings amid the foliage and underbrush.

Agnis slammed the door, her heart hammering in her chest. *Okay, I've got to think about this logically. I must be touching or doing something that triggers the spell and warps the room into the forest. Could it be the act of opening the door itself?*

Instead of opening the door, she called through it: "K'nock! Are you out there? Can you hear me?"

There was no response from the snow leopard.

Okay. That means the bathroom's already in the forest; just opening the door doesn't send it there. But there's got to be a way to bring it back! Maybe if I flush the toilet again . . . Yeah! That's gotta be it!

She flushed the toilet, then opened the door.

Forest.

"Damn!" She shut the door.

Okay, so it's not the toilet. Maybe the sink . . .

She turned the water on and off, then went back to the door and wrenched it open.

Forest.

She slammed the door. Feeling near hysterical, she opened and closed the door quickly several times in a row, as if she were trying to sneak up on whatever magic was responsible. But it was

no use. Every time she opened the door, the forest awaited. And to make matters worse, it was daylight out there. Did that mean the spell had transported her through time as well as space?

Agnis slid down the tiled wall of the bathroom and sat on the floor. She wanted to curl up in a corner and cry. She was all alone. Not even K'nock was with her. And she was surrounded by trackless forest. Weary and hopeless, Agnis grasped her staff tightly as tears welled up in her eyes.

"No, no, stop that," she said to herself. She wiped her eyes angrily. "You're not going to let this stop you, Agnis R. Link. You're better than that. You're a princess."

Agnis jumped up and ran out into the woods. Shaking her fist, she screamed up into the trees. "You hear that, witches? This isn't going to stop me! I didn't come this far just to sit in a corner and cry! I'll get back to the mansion, and when I do, I'm coming after you! That's a promise!"

A few startled birds fluttered away from the nearby trees as Agnis' words broke the silence of the forest. There was no other response. But Agnis felt better.

Of course, she still had no idea which way to go to find the mansion. For all she knew, this wasn't even the same forest, and the mansion was miles and miles away. There were no paths, not even a rough walkway, to guide her steps. But since she didn't know where she was anyway, it really didn't matter which direction she chose. Anything was better than standing still: left, right, backward, forward. Even up!

Up . . . That gave Agnis an idea.

She turned to one of the knobby old trees in front of her. It was covered with ivy and mottled with lots of bumps and knots. She had climbed a lot of trees in the palace garden when she was young, so she knew good footholds when she saw them.

She threw off her mantle, hitched up her skirts and, laying the staff to one side, began nimbly scaling the tree. Soon she was high in the uppermost branches. When her head popped out of the whispering canopy of leaves, she had a bird's-eye view of the entire forest.

It wasn't huge; she could see its edges from her lofty perch. But it totally lacked proper roads, and what trails she did spy switchbacked dizzily. The forest was one great, complicated maze. It certainly *looked* like the Witches' Forest. But if so, where was the mansion?

"Caw! Caw!" A large crow suddenly swooped down at her head, causing her to duck.

"Hey!" Agnis shouted. "Watch it!" Shifting her position, she glimpsed a nest full of eggs in the crux of a nearby branch. "Oh. Sorry!" she called as the crow circled over the trees, preparing to come at her again.

Then she saw something else: a pale green glint of something glittering through the trees. Could it be . . . Yes! The roof of the mansion! She *was* in the Witches' Forest after all!

"There it is! And it's not that far." She squinted, gauging its direction by the position of the sun—which was quickly becoming obscured by some ominous-looking clouds—then hurried down before the mother crow could dive-bomb her again.

When she was back on solid ground, something she heard distracted her.

"Mmm, mmm, mmm . . ."

It sounded like the whining of a frightened puppy. Agnis felt a pang in her heart. She loved animals, and this one was evidently in trouble. *Poor little guy! Is there really a puppy in the middle of the forest?*

“Mmm . . . mmm . . .”

There it was again, clearer now. Definitely a puppy. *Maybe the witches put it here*, she thought. They seemed like the types who would get their jollies from torturing a helpless little puppy! Could there be anything more monstrous, more inhuman? The thought of it drove Agnis into self-righteous fury. The fact that she herself had nearly toasted a family of innocent slimes a few hours earlier never crossed her mind. Puppies were cute; slimes were ugly. Any idiot could see the difference.

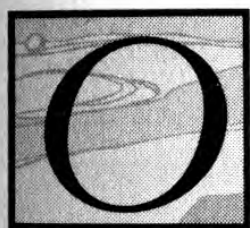
“Puppy?” she called. “Can you hear me? Are you okay?”

In response, she heard a faint yelp.

“Don’t worry, puppy, I’m coming!” Without a second thought, Agnis set out in the direction of the sound, using her staff to clear a path through the thick vegetation, never noticing that each step took her farther from the mansion, all under a darkening sky.

CHAPTER 17:

THE WOLF AT THE DOOR



Olba shifted his weight from one foot to the other, trying not to make sound as he craned his neck to get a better view of the landing where the two spiraling staircases met. There was definitely something up there; he heard it growling in the darkness. But was it an animal? A monster?

It was impossible to tell. The Port-o-Lant on the floor behind him was the only source of light in the hallway, and its illumination did not reach the landing, which was plunged in shadow. To get a clearer view, Olba would have to risk exposing himself to whatever was up there. He heard movement; another low growl. He couldn't tell if it were the same creature he'd heard before or another one. For all he knew, there was a whole pack of them.

Duan, beside him, watched his every move with anxious eyes. Check, perched on Duan's shoulder, also followed Olba's actions closely.

Olba sighed. Somehow, without intending it, he'd acquired a little brother and a pet; Duan and the baby grinia depended on him now. He glanced quickly in both directions, weighing the options, wondering how much time they had before the creature or creatures on the landing decided to attack.

To the left was a double door that led . . . Well, he didn't know where it led. He didn't even know if it were locked. He hadn't had a chance to test it before the chandelier had tried to turn Duan into a pancake.

To the right was the double door leading back into the dining room. It was close by, and he thought they could probably make a run for it. They'd already explored the dining room, so at least there would be less chance of an unpleasant surprise waiting for them there. And yet, Olba's instincts warned him against it. *The witches would expect us to make for that door*, he thought.

Just then, Duan, inching backward, tripped over the Port-o-Lant. His cry of surprise was squelched as Olba, turning, clapped a hand over his mouth. But the damage was done. A large, dark, snarling shadow came hurtling down the stairs.

"Run!" shouted Olba, shoving Duan toward the double door on the left. "Get to the door!"

Luckily, it was unlocked. Duan pushed it open and stumbled inside. Olba was right behind him. As the fighter turned to slam the door shut, he saw a huge shape leap across the banister straight toward him. At the same instant, thunder crashed from outside the mansion, and a flicker of lightning through the dirty windows illuminated something like the silhouette of a dog . . . only much, much larger. Olba barely got the door closed before the thing crashed against it with a frustrated howl.

Wow, that was close! thought Olba, bracing his back against the double door while whatever was outside tried to batter its way in. *My instincts were right. We wouldn't have made it to the dining room.*

Duan squeezed in beside him to help hold the door shut, and even Check joined in, fluttering madly in place above Duan's head as he pushed against the door with his tiny forepaws.

Another tremendous thunderclap rattled the windows, and the onslaught stopped, as if the noise had startled the creature on the other side. In the next second, they heard the sound of rain pour. It touched down on the roof and windows of the mansion with a lulling sound, as if it could wash away all their troubles.

But then they heard another sound: a loud, ominous scratching. The kind of scratching that could only come from claws the size of daggers. The double door had no deadbolt or lock; it was sturdy enough, but Olba knew that it wouldn't last forever. He already could hear the wood splintering under those claws.

As if the creature outside had read his mind, it chose that moment to throw its massive body against the door again. There was an immense THUMP, a blood-curdling howl . . . and it seemed for an instant that the door would explode right off its hinges.

"Giii!" The impact sent Check tumbling through the air.

"Aaaah!" Duan was knocked away from the door as well; he staggered back, nearly falling.

Only Olba, with his incredible strength, kept his position, forcing the door shut. But even he was strained to the utmost. "Duan!" he shouted breathlessly. "Don't just stand there! Find something to wedge up against the door. Something heavy!"

"I'm looking!" Duan shouted back as he examined their surroundings for the first time. They seemed to be in a living room of some sort, about the same size as the dining room. It had a bookshelf, a disused fireplace, and some upholstered furniture. A massive sofa and armchair, both of heavy wood, were supported by claw-and-ball feet. "What about this armchair?"

"Bring it over—and hurry!"

Duan blinked. "B-by myself?"

"If you . . . wouldn't mind?" gasped Olba as the door flexed behind him like a living thing. "I'm just a . . . little busy . . . right now!"

Duan ran to the armchair and began to drag it over to the door. That is, he grasped an armrest and pulled with all his might. But the chair wouldn't budge. It was as though the claws on its feet had dug into the floor, rendering it immobile. Duan ran behind the chair, put his shoulder to the high back, and pushed, grunting with the effort.

"Duan push!" cheered Check from his perch on the mantel of the fireplace. "Push hard!"

"I *am* pushing, Check!"

"Check help!" The grinia flew at the back of the armchair like a green bullet. He hit the upholstery and bounced off, fluttering to the floor and making weird noises: "Giis! Raka! Orb!" Cross-eyed, he looked as if he'd gotten into Olba's liquor.

"Will you two quit fooling around?" yelled Olba. "I need that armchair *now*!"

"I can't move it, Olba," Duan confessed, embarrassed.

"Oh, for the love of . . . Get over here and hold the door."

"But I—"

“Just for a second. It’ll be okay. Whatever’s out there seems to be taking a breather.”

Trading places with Olba, Duan quickly slipped out of his backpack and braced his back against the door, holding it as well as he could. Check, undiscouraged by his previous attempts to help, came fluttering over and stood on Duan’s head, stretching out his tiny arms to offer what assistance he could.

Looking at the two of them, even the scowling Olba couldn’t keep a straight face. The sight was so comical that he had to laugh. Even in the face of the gravest danger, he found it hard to maintain a serious mood around these two.

“Okay,” he said, striding over to the armchair and wrapping his muscular arms around it, “let me show you how a *real* man moves furniture! This is gonna be a piece of—ugh!—*cake*?”

But even with Olba’s strength, the armchair wouldn’t budge. The big fighter shifted his stance and tried again—lifting, pushing, pulling. “Maybe if I take off my backpack I can get a better grip . . .”

Nothing.

Olba examined the chair, bewildered; it looked heavy, but not unusually so, nor was it bolted to the floor. But the damn thing refused to budge. He was exhausting his strength for nothing.

“A piece of cake, eh?” Now it was Duan’s turn to smirk. “It must be held down by magic,” he added. “It’s another one of the witches’ tricks! What are we—?”

A huge blow to the door cut Duan off in mid-sentence and nearly sent him flying. He recovered quickly, but the door had opened an inch under the attack, and now there were nasty-looking claws coming through the gap, scrabbling against the door jam.

“Idiot!” screamed Olba. “Hold it shut!”

“S-sorry, I—aagh!” Sharp and jagged fangs, golden yellow in color, broke through the gap right next to Duan’s face and started gnawing at the door. “Olbaaa!”

“Giiiiiiiiis!” Check fluttered around Duan’s head, shrieking incoherently.

“Hold on!” Drawing his long sword, Olba charged at the door. Duan flinched and turned his face away as the fighter swung the sword down, striking at the fangs.

There was a hideous whine, and the fangs and paws withdrew suddenly. A blood-covered fragment of one fang lay on the floor. Olba picked it up—the tooth was as big as his finger, its point as sharp as his dagger.

Howls of pain and outrage continued outside the door; Duan looked over his shoulder apprehensively. “Great. Now it’s pissed off.”

“Yeah.” Olba looked closely at the bloody tooth. “And now we know it’s not just a wild dog or a werewolf,” he added grimly. “With a tooth like this, it’s gotta be a monster in the Bonehead family.”

Duan ran through the list of legendary monsters in his head, and his blood ran cold. “Oh no, not Ce-Ce-Cerberus?” he stuttered.

With all the legendary monsters they’d encountered so far—a cyclops, a hydra, a griffin, a minotaur—he wouldn’t have been surprised if the notorious guard-dog of hell had shown up next.

But Olba shook his head. “No, it’s not Cerberus. The creature I glimpsed out there had only one head. Besides, who cares what it’s *supposed* to be? We both know that it’s just another fake!” With a contemptuous shrug, Olba tossed the bloody tooth over his shoulder; it bounced once, then came to

rest on the carpet. "A wooden puppet that the witches turned into a monster."

"So?" answered Duan. "Those monsters may have been fake, but that didn't make them any *weaker*. In fact, for all we know, the magic that creates them actually makes them *stronger* than if they were real."

"Now, ain't that a comforting thought!" said Olba sarcastically. "You're a smart guy, Duan, but sometimes you think a little bit too much. You go ahead and speculate all you want about the finer points of conjuring. Me, I'm gonna concentrate on getting out of here before Rover out there breaks the door down."

As if to underscore his point, the creature resumed its battering with even greater ferocity. Duan pressed himself against the door, terror lending him new strength. Then he thought of something else and gasped: "Oh no!"

"Now what?"

"K'nock. He's still out there!"

"Good," replied Olba. "Maybe he'll take out this monster for us."

"But he's hurt!"

"If you want to go get him, be my guest!"

In the midst of their arguing, Check began to flap about and squawk. "Gii, danger! Danger!"

"Oh, shut up, Check," Olba snapped. "We know we're in *danger*. For cripe's sake, we're *always* in danger! You don't have to keep reminding us every five seconds!"

"N-no, Olba . . . l-l-look!" Duan stuttered. He pointed with a shaking finger.

Olba peered at it. The fang he'd tossed to the floor quivered. As he looked more closely, it began to bounce up and down on the carpet.

“What the . . . ?”

White smoke rose swiftly from the fang as if it were on fire. Olba, Duan, and Check watched closely as the swirling cloud slowly solidified into a dark figure.

“Remind you of anything?” Olba asked, glancing toward Duan.

“It kind of looks like a dog, don’t you think?” Duan replied.

“Crap, that’s what I thought too,” Olba said. “You know what that means?”

“That we’re screwed?” Duan hazarded.

“Big time,” said Olba, “unless we get out of here fast, before that thing finishes materializing. There’s another door across the room—we’ve got to make a run for it!”

“But what about *this* door?” Duan barely held it shut against the blows of the dog outside. “As soon as I leave, that bonehead thing’ll get in!”

“Kid, if we’re not out of here in about five seconds, I don’t think it’s gonna matter,” said Olba. “Now, when I say go, I want you to make a run for it, okay?”

“Um, okay.”

“Go!”

Taking a deep breath, Duan bolted across the room. He had just passed the cloud of white smoke and the dark shape it contained, which grew more solid by the second, when—

“Giis! Pack! Giis!” Check flapped agitatedly around his head.

Duan glanced over his shoulder and groaned. He had left his backpack by the door. “I’ll get it, Check! You go with Olba!”

“Forget it!” cried Olba, waiting impatiently by the other door, his own pack securely strapped on.

But Duan had already rushed back. As quickly as he could, he grabbed his pack and began to run back across the room.

He hadn't taken more than a few steps when the door behind him flew open with a huge crash and a large black shape came tumbling into the room, bowled over by the force of its own entry. It knocked into Duan and sent him flying.

"Duan!" Olba cried.

"Duan! Duan! Gii!"

"No, Check!" Olba grabbed the frantic grinia to keep him from rushing to Duan's side, where he would only have put himself in danger.

In the midst of all this, the thing that had bowled Duan over scrambled onto all fours. It was big: as tall as Duan and at least eight feet wide. It had the body of a dog, its jet-black fur all spiky and glistening. But its head was not a dog's head: it was a skull. A dog's skull to be sure, but a skull nevertheless, with flickering red flames in the hollows where its eyes belonged. Golden-yellow fangs glistened like serrated knives in its grinning jaws, and a blood-red tongue, lolling sideways from between those fangs, hung limply over its chin bone. The creature peered around the room, panting and sniffing the air.

This was the sight that greeted Duan when he came to his senses beneath his pack. He caught his breath and stared, too terrified to move, as the demonic dog let out a low growl.

"Don't move," Olba whispered from beside the door.

"Who's moving," Duan hissed back.

But the creature ignored them. Its attention was riveted on the cloud of white smoke. Or, rather, on what was within that cloud, for at that instant, the smoke faded away, revealing another bonehead—an exact replica of the first, except the second dog's tongue hung out of the left side of its mouth, whereas the tongue of the first hung to the right.

"Danger!" squawked Check, fluttering to free himself from Olba's grasp.

"Quiet, Check!" hissed Olba, clapping a hand over the grinia's mouth.

But the two boneheads had eyes only for each other, spiky black fur becoming even spikier as they stared, the red flames flickering eerily in the depths of their skulls. Slowly, they began to circle each other in the center of the room, growling.

What a stroke of luck, thought Olba. They hate each other! We might still have a chance. He gestured for Duan to come toward the door.

Duan nodded. Sliding out from under his pack, he crawled along the floor, using the pack as a kind of shield.

Olba, who had rolled his eyes at Duan's wasting time to fetch the pack, now saw its usefulness. He nodded encouragement, motioning for Duan to hurry.

Duan crept farther along the floor. The only sound was the mutual snarling of the boneheads, the hollow rattle of their jawbones clattering together. All went well until Duan collided with the armchair.

The dogs looked up as one, fixing the flames of their gaze directly on Duan.

"Run!" shouted Olba. Drawing his long sword, he stepped away from the door. "And this time, forget the damn pack!"

Released by the fighter, Check shot into the air. "Danger! Dog jump!"

Duan hadn't even begun to run when one of the boneheads sprang at him. He screamed, raising his arms to protect himself as the hideously grinning skull came at him. But before its jaws could snap shut, the second dog sprang . . . onto the back of the first, sinking its long golden fangs into the scruff of its rival's neck.

Yelping and growling, the two dogs went at it, tumbling across the floor and knocking the heavy furniture around as if it were made of paper.

Seizing his chance, Duan grabbed his pack and ran frantically for the door.

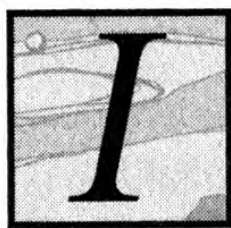
Olba, in the meantime, had yanked the door open, revealing a spiral staircase that led upward.

Duan ran past him through the door, followed by Check. Olba backed in behind them, sword at the ready. But the boneheads were too busy fighting each other to pay attention to their escaping prey.

Safely outside the tumultuous room, Olba sheathed his sword with a sigh of relief. "Man, lucky for us those things are boneheads in more ways than one," he said to Duan as he slammed the door closed behind him.

CHAPTER 18:

А П А П Р О І П Т Ш Е П Т W I T H D E A T H



In the stillness of the forest, the only human sound was the labored breathing of a lone traveler. He was a very tall, very thin man with a face so pale that it was almost blue. Light brown hair clung to his high forehead, which was covered in a sheen of sweat. He had long since taken off the dark cloak he usually wore—it was expensive and he didn't want to soak it through with perspiration—and now he carried it slung over his shoulder. He limped as though his whole body were a mass of bruises.

I wonder how long I've been walking, the man thought. Hours? Days? The sun seems to be setting—didn't it set once already today?

He rubbed his head and groaned. *This damn forest is so disorienting! I feel like I'm walking in circles. Can this day possibly get any worse? First I miss a clear shot at the princess, and then that big fighter chases me until I trip over a stupid. Now even my bruises have bruises, and the way my head is pounding, I wouldn't be surprised if*

I've got a concussion on top of everything else. Worst of all, I've lost the trail, and my compass is useless!

The assassin suddenly stopped, blinking in confusion as he studied his surroundings. Had he been this way before? It didn't look familiar, but he couldn't be sure. After all, the forest was enchanted to make travelers lose their way. He sighed irritably, mopping the sweat from his forehead.

I'm gonna demand a big bonus when I get back to Fiana, he silently vowed. If I get back . . .

He plodded on, grumbling to himself. He hated the forest, he hated the heat; but most of all, he hated the sweat. It poured out of him, sticking to his skin and making him shiver. He felt like he had a fever—and he knew it was more than the weather. As another chill racked his body, he removed a pill from his bag and popped it into his mouth, swallowing it dry. The bitter taste made him gag, but he got the pill down. *Bitter is better*—the old saying ran through his head, as it always did after he took one of his pills, and he comforted himself with that thought as he trudged on through the forest.

The assassin didn't know it, but the pill he took was only a placebo. For the last few years, he had been afflicted with fevers that struck out of nowhere, causing his temperature to rise until he suffered a spasm so violent that he lost consciousness. The doctors were baffled. He had seen every specialist from Froll to Fiana, and no two of them agreed on the cause of his fevers. But they all agreed on the effect: with each attack, his heart grew weaker, and there was nothing they could do about it. Finally, a sympathetic doctor had prescribed what he claimed was a panacea: pills that could cure any illness. But really they were nothing but sugar pills. The doctor hadn't seen any harm in it; the causes of sickness were often as much mental as physical, and he'd thought that if his patient believed in the efficacy of the

treatment, it might ease the man's nerves and help to alleviate his spasms. In any case, it would do no outright harm.

But the pills hadn't changed anything. The assassin continued to shiver and sweat and recently he'd begun to suffer from another symptom, one he couldn't bring himself to admit, even to the doctors: he had nightmares. Terrible nightmares of all the people he had killed, which only increased in frequency. He was never able to get a decent night's sleep, and as a result, he was always tired. He felt that his strength was fatally dwindling.

Perhaps the fortune-teller who had once told him that it was a curse was right, though at the time, he had laughed scornfully. He couldn't count how many people he had killed over the course of his career; it would have been a miracle if someone *hadn't* put a curse on him somewhere along the line. Yes, maybe it was karma, divine justice for the many people he had sent to their deaths, a final ironic twist of fate. The nails stabbing into his heart as he walked through the forest told him his own fate would be no different in the end. The next spasm could be his last.

The assassin was able to sense imminent death; that was part of his occupation. He had caught its scent countless times before: that metallic smell in the air, like blood or electricity, foretelling his own victory, the inescapable fate of his victims. He had always taken pleasure in it. This time, however, was different. The scent hung around him like mist—thick and ominous. He was afraid that this time, the death he sensed might be his own.

No, it's too soon! I can't die—not before I finish the job. O you powers of blackest betrayal, of poison and murder, listen to your servant! Please grant me one last burst of strength, enough to bring you a final blood sacrifice!

As if in answer to his prayer, a sudden thunderclap sounded overhead and heavy raindrops began to fall. He hobbled under the nearest tree for cover and spread his mantle over his head. But the rain pelted down like bullets all around him; there was no use looking for better shelter. Windswept rain soaked him despite the cover supplied by his mantle. He began shivering again. Looking up at the dark, angry sky, the assassin managed a bitter smile.

Thanks a lot, Evil Gods.

Just when he began to give up all hope, the assassin turned—and saw an incredible sight.

Ahead of him, several large trees stood in a row, and between them, illuminated by a flash of lightning, he could make out a large black beast lying on its stomach. It was so large, in fact, and so still that at first the assassin mistook it for a boulder. Though the rain beat down furiously on its great hairy back, the creature remained tense, not moving a muscle. It looked as though it were waiting to spring upon its prey.

What's this?

The assassin remained perfectly still too, watching from the safety of the trees, as a girl's voice rang out sweetly through the beating rain.

“Doggie? Where are you? Come on out here, doggie—I won't hurt you!”

The assassin perked up his ears; his throat went bone-dry. He knew that voice! *It's her! The princess! But what's she doing out here?*

“Doggie, come out! Ouch . . . this damned rain!”

The voice of the princess was getting closer now; the assassin couldn't believe his luck. Had his target stumbled into his sights?

Just then, the beast raised its head.

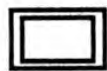
Even the assassin, who was used to seeing horrible things, was disturbed by the sight. The creature's head was fleshless, nothing more than a bare skull. Red flames flickered in each eye socket. A red tongue drooped out from between long yellow fangs. Even more disturbing, in response to the girl's call, it made the most incongruous sound imaginable: a puppy whimpering.

"Mmm . . . Mmm . . . Mmm . . ."

The pitiable sound, coming as it did from the jaws of a terrifying monster, sent fresh chills down the assassin's spine.

It was clear that the creature waited to ambush the princess. The assassin stood firm, grinning under the pelting rain. The scent of death in the air was strong now, unmistakable.

Only it isn't my death after all, the assassin thought, almost giddy with relief. It's hers!



"Here, doggie, doggie, doggie! Where are you? Hello?—Ack!" Stumbling in the rain, Agnis caught her foot in an exposed tree root and fell against a branch . . . which promptly dumped its load of rainwater on her. She flipped a lock of dripping wet flame-red hair out of her eyes and glared at her drenched clothing.

"Look at me. I'm soaked!"

She gave the hem of her robe a good squeeze; water cascaded from it. She sighed. If only she were a high-level Elementaller like her mother, she could dry this out in a flash. But things weren't that easy for Agnis. She could only cast one extremely powerful Fire spell, and while that spell came in handy in certain situations, this wasn't among them.

She couldn't help thinking of Olba and Duan, back at the witches' mansion. Were they looking for her now? Did they

even realize she was missing? She imagined them kicking back in comfortable chairs, with K'nock by their side, enjoying a joke beside a roaring fire as they listened to the thunder and rain outside. She sighed heavily.

Aw, man, she thought. It's so unfair!

She looked around, straining to see in the darkening forest. The rain was really hammering down now, not to mention the thunder and lightning seemed to be advancing nearer to where she stood. Ordinarily, from a safe distance, inside a building, with a cup of steaming tea in her hands, she liked thunder and lightning just fine. Out here in the forest, where they could come crashing down on her head at any moment, was another story.

"Here, puppy! Where are you?" she called again.

There was no answer—only the sound of raindrops striking the foliage.

The picture of herself all warm and cozy in the mansion was an inviting one. But in her mind's eye, the vision of a poor, cold, helpless puppy, trembling in the rain and possibly hurt, was more compellingly real to her.

I'll just look a little longer. I know that I'm close! That puppy has to be around here somewhere.

Just then, she heard the whining again. "Mmm . . . mmm . . ." It was close, coming from somewhere to her left. Peering through the downpour, she saw a clearing, and beyond it, a row of trees.

"So *that's* where you are!" Immensely relieved, Agnis used her staff to clear a path toward the puppy. Its whining led her on, then stopped abruptly.

Agnis stopped too. Something didn't feel right.

Suddenly she heard a noise, like a large creature crashing through the foliage. She caught a glimpse of something big

and black coming straight at her. With a cry, Agnis ducked and rolled aside. Huge black paws with immense claws hit the ground only a few feet away from her. Stifling a scream, Agnis looked up—and froze in terror.

Illuminated by a jagged burst of lightning, she saw a black doglike body, hackles raised, fur spiky and dripping wet, and a head that was nothing more than a skull, empty of everything except two red flames where its eyes should have been. Its teeth were long and sharp and uneven, a mouthful of daggers, all of them gold colored. Then, from that nightmarish face and those lipless fangs, came a deceptively pitiful whining sound.

“Mmm . . . mmm . . . mmm . . .”

Agnis stared in disbelief. She’d never seen a bonehead before, and so didn’t recognize what kind of monster she faced. She could scarcely believe that this hideous *thing* had been making the plaintive cry of a puppy.

“Mmm . . . mmm . . . mmm . . .”

As if taunting her, the monster kept up its helpless whining even as it pawed the ground, preparing to leap at her again. Agnis felt herself flush with rage as the realization sank in that she had been tricked.

“How *dare* you!” she shouted, jumping to her feet with such fury that even the monster was a bit cowed. It took a step backward and ceased whining.

“Picking on people by pretending to be a puppy! Why, you’re nothing but a big *phony*!” Brandishing her staff, Agnis advanced toward the creature and began chanting the Fire spell.

The monster, quick to recover, gathered itself to spring—then suddenly gave a sharp yelp and swayed where it stood.

Agnis broke off her chant in surprise as several arrows whistled out of the nearby bushes, each one striking the beast.

The monster jerked violently, snapping with its jaws at the arrows sprouting in its side, but it was no use. With a final whine, it fell on its side to the ground, landing with a thud against a protruding rock. Its bare skull cracked like an egg. The flames in its eye sockets guttered and went out as the skull crumbled, spilling shattered teeth on the ground.

Agnis crouched low, her staff raised protectively, her eyes searching the bushes for some sign of whoever had shot the beast. But she saw no one. Nearby, an arrow that had missed its target stood quivering in the muddy ground. She picked it up by the feathered shaft. It was tipped with a bluish metal.

This metal—it's dordo, from Fiana! The arrow is the same kind that the assassin tried to kill me with earlier!

Just then she heard a rustling sound and looked up. A tall, lanky man emerged from the bushes. At the sight of him, Agnis let the arrow drop. The man met her gaze as casually as if she were a passerby in the street. He didn't say a word, just began retrieving the spent arrows from the ground.

The rain had slowed and seemed about to stop: wet drops fell from the trees, splashing in the silence. Finally, Agnis spoke. "I've seen you somewhere before," she said.

The man let out a sorrowful laugh. "I've been working in the kingdom of Fiana since before you were born."

"Do you work for my father? Are you a servant?"

"No, not a servant as such," the man replied, shaking his head. "But I receive commissions from time to time."

Agnis felt sweat break out on her brow. She knew very well that she was talking to the man who had been stalking her ever since she had left Fiana, the man who had tried to kill her. Yet, for reasons she couldn't understand or imagine, he had saved her life. And now he was having a casual conversation with her, as though they were old acquaintances who'd run

into each other unexpectedly in some corridor of the castle. She took a step backward, smiling nervously.

“Well, I must extend my gratitude to you, sir, for your service on my behalf. Thank you for slaying this monster.”

Again, the man laughed and averted his eyes from her gaze. He appeared to be in some pain.

“I did not expect to receive such words from your Highness,” he said, quietly. “That makes this difficult.”

“Difficult?”

“Yes,” he said. He looked her in the eye again; this time, his gaze was intense in a way that made Agnis uncomfortable. “Because now . . .” He took a step forward. Seeing this, Agnis took another step backward, but he kept advancing. “Now I have to kill you,” he concluded, almost apologetically.

Agnis gasped. She had known the man was hunting her, but somehow, now that he stood here, talking to her, she couldn’t quite believe what he said. She grasped her staff, wondering if she should use her magic, but she couldn’t do it. She had never used the Fire spell on a person before, and she couldn’t conceive of killing a human being, especially one who had just saved her life, even if he wanted to kill *her*. But did he really? It was all so strange! She continued to back away, thoughts whirling in her brain, but the assassin followed relentlessly.

“K-kill me? B-but why?” Agnis stammered, genuinely perplexed.

“I’m afraid that it is not my business to tell you,” the assassin replied.

“It’s Queen Ramua, isn’t it? She gave you the commission.”

Even as she asked the question, Agnis knew the assassin wouldn’t answer it. He just smiled gently and then extended his hand.

"No! Get away from me!" Agnis swung at him with the staff and turned to run, but the man caught hold of the hem of her mantle, and she tumbled to the ground.

"Please, Princess," the assassin murmured, advancing toward her. "There's no point making this any harder than it needs to be."

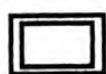
But Agnis had never been very good at heeding what other people told her, and she wasn't about to start now. Struggling to her feet, she swung the staff again.

The assassin swatted it away as if it were a mere annoyance. Before she could strike another blow, he wrenched the staff from her grasp and threw it aside.

"Try not to struggle too much," he advised her.

"Are you kidding? Ouch! Get off of me!" Agnis clawed and bit and kicked, fighting for her life with everything she had.

As they struggled, neither Agnis nor the assassin noticed that something strange had begun to happen not very far away. Next to the bonehead's shattered skull, the scattered golden fangs had started to bounce around on the wet ground as though they were alive.



It was no use. Despite Agnis' struggles, the assassin soon had her backed against a tree. She had retreated as far as she could. With rising panic, she realized that this could really be the end. As her eyes filled with horror, the man smiled.

"You see? Resistance is pointless." He spoke soothingly, as if to a child; somehow, that made it even more terrible. "You might as well accept your fate."

Then, more quickly than she would have believed possible, the killer's hands were around her neck. She tried to claw his face, but his arms were longer than hers and she couldn't

reach it. His long, slender fingers tightened as she choked and gasped for breath. Her own hands flapped uselessly at her sides. The last thing she saw was the assassin's gentle smile.

Then, as in a dream, Agnis found herself gazing into the beautiful face of her mother, laughing, calm, contented. Rubis reached out to stroke her daughter's hair . . .

But the hand that reached for her belonged to her father, Palea. He threw her up into the air, as he did when she was a child. Agnis felt so light, so happy.

She looked down at her father's smiling noble face, which then became K'nock's wide, muscular back. She could feel the softness of his fur as he carried her along the edge of a forest. The peaceful countryside of Fiana spread out below them; the surf crashed against the cliffs. Home—he was taking her home!

But in the next instant, all these happy images were blown away and she found herself looking at Queen Ramua, who gazed at her with undisguised hatred.

Agnis had always known that Ramua hated her. She'd even known, in an abstract way, that it was Ramua who had sent the assassin after her. But to see that face now, a face she had known all her life, and to know that Ramua not only *wished* her dead, but was cold-blooded enough to actually *order* her death—and not only *her* death, but that of her *mother* as well, who had never harmed a soul in her life . . . It was a depth of evil beyond Agnis' comprehension.

In the interim, the assassin, who had felt her body going limp in his grasp, congratulated himself on another successful mission. To say that he was surprised when her eyes suddenly flew open would be an understatement.

"Aaah!" With a shrill scream, he suddenly released her and staggered back.

Agnis took the opportunity to run like hell.

“Hey! Come back!” the assassin called, quickly recovering himself.

Agnis didn’t have the breath to respond. The rush of blood to her head combined with the effects of oxygen deprivation made her giddy; it took all of her concentration just to stay on her feet. Trying to remember where she had thrown her staff, she saw something that stopped her in her tracks.

It was the dead bonehead.

Or, rather, its teeth. They were jumping, frenzied, at the center of a thickening cloud of white smoke.

The assassin caught up to her, but he stopped short of grabbing her again. He didn’t say a word. He just stared. They were no longer predator and prey, assassin and victim. They were united in mutual terror.

Great volumes of white smoke billowed around the rock where the monster had hit its head. As they watched, petrified, shadowy forms appeared within the smoke—first one, then another, and then another. They became more distinct in the white haze, solidifying, taking shape: the same skull heads, the same lolling tongues, the same canine bodies.

Agnis counted to herself: *One, two, three, four . . . five . . . SIX . . . ?*

“Run!” the assassin shouted. But before Agnis could object, or even realize what was happening, the assassin picked her slender body up and, holding her under one arm, took off running into the forest.

“B-but—what are you doing?” Agnis had recovered enough to gasp.

The truth was, the assassin had no idea why he tried to save her . . . for the second. He had acted on instinct. Whether it was a sudden, unfamiliar, altruistic impulse, or simply a desire

to take what was his before it was stolen away from him—he simply didn't know.

And he would never know, because he'd hardly taken a dozen steps before the first monster took shape behind him and, leaping forward, plunged its claws into the assassin's back.

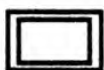
"Urrgh . . ." The man dropped Agnis and crumpled to his knees. Warm blood spilled onto his shoes. Excruciating pain, worse than the worst heart spasm he had ever experienced, shot through his chest. Glancing down, he saw blood pouring from his shirt and realized that he had been run through: the claws of the bonehead had skewered him. He knew enough about such things to understand that there was no hope for him. The wound was fatal; he was going to die.

Having visited death upon so many others, the assassin remained philosophical in the face of his own. He watched calmly as the blood flowed out of him—so intimate, so brutal. His eyes were rapidly losing their sight, but he was able to see Agnis bending over him with concern.

"Run, you fool!" A clot of blood bubbled between his lips; he spit and coughed. "Hurry!"

As he fell face forward onto the ground, he heard her footsteps running off between the trees, as well as the snarling of the dogs around him as they gave chase. But they were distant now and hardly concerned him anymore. He smiled to himself as the world constricted like the closing of an eye, and a familiar metallic odor rose in his nostrils.

I knew it, he thought. I was right the first time. It was the smell of my own death, after all.



Agnis ran through the forest, wet branches whipping at her face. She felt numb, bewildered.

The man who had come to kill her had died trying to save her life. *But why?*

She didn't have time to think about that now. The dogs were hot on her heels; she could hear their heavy breathing and the crashing of foliage beneath their heavy paws.

Eventually, in the wet grass, she found her staff and the rest of her stuff. As she tried to snatch up her belongings, the pack of demonic dogs surrounded her, panting heavily—long crimson tongues dripped with something that looked like blood. Their heads turned to her, flames dancing inside their eye sockets, and then, as if taunting her again, the boneheads began whining together like frightened puppies, all at the same time. “Mmm . . . mmm . . . mmm . . .”

Agnis took a deep breath and brandished her staff, glaring at the monsters in front of her. “That’s it!” she declared. “Now you’ve *really* made me mad!” And with that, she started to murmur the incantation.

A soft wind began to waft around the clearing. The boneheads stopped whining and sniffed the air, confused for a moment. Then, growling, they leapt toward Agnis in unison, fangs bared.

WHOMP! Plumes of fire erupted from the staff, illuminating the wet trees around them.

WHOOSH! The flames engulfed the beasts in midair. They barely had time to cry out before the fireball hit them—the dark forest glowing orange and the forms of the beasts crumbling within the roaring blaze.

Agnis fell to the ground, exhausted.

The moist leaves around her hissed with steam as the fire licked them. Then, following a low rumble of thunder, the rain began falling again. Agnis watched, too weak to move, as the flames wilted under the watery onslaught.

The world around her seemed to flicker and go dark. *No, not now!* she urged herself. *You can't lose consciousness, not out here! Have you come all this way just to die because you're too damn weak to keep your eyes open?*

More from stubborn determination than strength, Agnis willed herself to stay awake. The rain on her face helped. She thought of Duan and Olba and K'nock. And Rubis, turned into a caged bird, easy prey for whatever cruelties Ramua might devise. She had to hang on. She had to!

Slowly, after what seemed like an eternity, she felt her strength returning.

So far, so good. Now let's try standing up.

She struggled to her feet, using her staff for support, then cast an apprehensive glance in the direction of the first bonehead, the one that had spawned all the others. It was gone!

Oh, no. Don't tell me it came back to life too!

Resolutely, leaning heavily on her staff, Agnis limped over to where the monster had fallen against the rock. If it were still alive, or rather, alive again, she didn't think she had another Fire spell in her. She was relieved to find a small wooden doll: it had been a spell of the witches, just like the other monsters.

With a sigh, Agnis crouched in the wet grass of the clearing, near the prone form of the assassin, his wide-open eyes still gazing at the sky. Agnis closed the lids with her hand, then regarded his face with a mixture of curiosity and sadness. Even though he had tried to kill her, she couldn't help feeling a sense of profound loss—and gratitude.

He died trying to save me. But why? And why is he smiling?

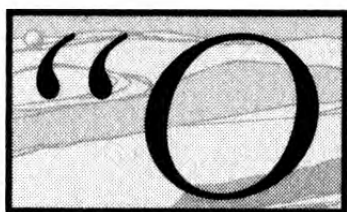
Agnis felt the ground sway underneath her. She was still weak from her ordeal. She realized suddenly that this was the first time she had not passed out immediately after casting the

Fire spell. That made her proud—but she also knew that she couldn't waste any time. She had to get back to the mansion fast, before what little strength she had deserted her. Already she could feel it ebbing. She hated to leave the assassin's body unburied, exposed to wandering animals, but there was nothing she could do for him now. She stood on shaky legs and began to make her way through the forest, leaning like a feeble old crone on her staff.

"C'mon, girl, c'mon!" Agnis talked to herself to stay awake. "You gotta get . . . back there! Back to . . . K'nock and the others. You've just got to! Mother is . . . counting on you. You can't let her down. Not here . . . not now!"

CHAPTER 19:

VERTIGO



uch! Watch where you're going, will ya?" Olba, a few steps ahead on the spiral staircase, turned and scowled down at Duan.

"Well, if you'd hold that Port-o-Lant a little higher . . ."

"Just try to keep your wits about you," Olba snapped back. Peering up the dark staircase, he added grimly, "I don't like the looks of this."

Olba had reason to be worried. The staircase had seemed like an escape route, but upon reaching the second-floor landing, they'd discovered a problem: there was no door leading out of the stairwell, just a barred casement window. And since the bars were made of iron and not even Olba could budge them, they had no choice but to continue upward.

Another trick of the witches, concluded the infuriated Olba. He had the feeling that something big was waiting for them at the top of the stairs. Then, realizing that this was exactly how the witches wanted him to feel, he got even more irritable.

Finally they reached the third-floor landing, which was exactly the same as the second-floor landing with two exceptions. First, the stairs did not extend up beyond the third floor. And second, the casement window lacked metal bars.

"Well," said Olba, glancing around the otherwise empty landing, "it looks like there's only one way out, unless we want to go back down—which, in case you were wondering, we don't."

"I wasn't wondering," Duan said as Check, who had been riding on his shoulder, flew over to the windowsill. Duan followed. Gazing out the window, he saw through the pouring rain the forest he'd been stuck in for what seemed like forever, though only a few days had actually passed since he'd wandered into it, searching for his vanished unit.

I wonder what happened to them? he thought. But he had other worries now.

"Don't touch the window, Check," he cautioned the baby grinia. "It might be a trap."

Check, who had been about to do just that, drew back sharply. "Giia!"

"Good thinking, kid," Olba said approvingly. "I'll make an adventurer of you yet. That window is too convenient—it's got trap written all over it! How much you want to bet there's a secret passage around here somewhere?" He slowly circled the landing, tapping on the walls and floor.

Duan watched intently, basking in Olba's praise and hoping to pick up some tips.

"Giis! Fire!" squawked Check suddenly.

Duan jumped. "Where?"

"In forest! Chaa!"

Sure enough, a plume of gray smoke was rising out of the forest a mile or so away.

“Olba, there’s some kind of fire out there!” Duan called excitedly. “Maybe it’s Agnis!”

“Oh, sure it’s her!” Olba retorted sarcastically. “You think she walked into that bathroom downstairs and walked out of it a mile away in the middle of the forest? It couldn’t possibly be that lightning struck a tree, could it?”

“Well . . .” Duan squinted through the glass. “It’s kind of hard to see. The window is all fogged up.” Without thinking, he raised his hand and wiped the glass clear.

“Aaagh!” cried Olba. “I told you not to touch the window!”

“Gii-ii!” cried Check, zooming across the room to take shelter behind the big fighter.

“Um, sorry,” said Duan, blushing furiously. “But look—no trap!”

“Just cause you were lucky doesn’t mean—aaagh! Now what are you doing?”

“What does it look like? I’m opening the window!”

“No you’re not!” Olba pushed Duan roughly aside. “What is wrong with you?” he demanded, hands on hips. “Are you under some kind of spell?”

“I’m just trying to help!”

“Help? You coulda gotten us killed!”

“But there’s no trap . . .”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” said Olba. He drew up close to the window and examined it from top to bottom.

“Well?”

“Just as I thought,” he said. “No trap!”

“What?” Now Duan was furious. “But you said—”

“Quit crowding me, kid.” Olba reached for the latch on the casement; it turned easily, but the panes seemed to be stuck. It took him a few tries, pushing with all his might, before they

swung open so suddenly that he lost his balance and tumbled forward across the sill.

“Whoa!” Duan grabbed hold of Olba’s pack and hauled the fighter back inside—or tried to, anyway. But Olba was too heavy for him, so the best he could do was stop the older adventurer from slipping any farther out.

Olba’s voice came from outside: “Er, Duan, do you think you could pull me in? It’s a long way down.”

“I’m trying!”

“Check help!” cried the grinia, adding his miniscule weight to Duan’s.

“How humiliating,” muttered Olba. “At least Agnis isn’t here to see.”

“What . . . did you say?” asked Duan, straining with all his might.

“Never mind! It’s working! Keep pulling!”

Little by little, the fighter was drawn back into the room. At last he reached a point where he could grab hold of the sill and recruit his own strength. “Damn, that was close! I—hey!”

Olba pointed at something.

“Now what?” gasped Duan.

“There’s another window out here!”

“Really?” Duan let go of Olba and poked his head out the casement, into the rain. “Where?”

“Look over there.” Clinging to the window frame with one hand, Olba pointed to the left: about ten feet away, at the same height, the glass of another casement window glistened in the downpour. “We need to get to that window.”

“Well . . .” Duan looked doubtful. “It’s kind of far away. And like you said, it *is* a long way down. Besides, we don’t know what’s behind that window, or even if it’s unlocked!”

“We can break through if we have to. Besides, what’s the alternative? Would you rather go back downstairs and face the boneheads?”

“Right, the window it is!” said Duan, convinced.

Chuckling, Olba pulled himself back inside, shaking the rain from his body like a dog. Then he slipped his pack off his shoulders and began rummaging around inside. “Ah, here’s what we need.”

He brought out the Coily Coily Rope, then strode back to the casement window. He tied one end of the rope through a pillar near the window. Then he turned to Duan and began wrapping the other end around his waist.

“Wait a minute, wait a minute! *I’m* going first?” Duan raised his eyebrows in surprise; he could feel himself starting to panic. Thunder boomed ominously outside as Olba continued tying the rope around him.

“Well, yeah.” Olba blinked up at him. “For things like this, it’s better if the lighter person goes first. Besides, you wanted adventure, didn’t you? It’s time to start adventuring!”

“Oh, right,” Duan said robotically, barely listening. All he could concentrate on was the long drop it would be to the ground.

Olba continued talking as he secured the rope around Duan’s waist. “Now listen carefully. Once you’re outside, you need to go along the wall, using that ledge there, until you get to the other window. Take a peek inside. If the coast is clear, open the window. If it won’t open right away, don’t waste time—break the glass and get inside. Once you’re in, fix the rope onto something sturdy, like this pillar. Then lean out and give me the go-ahead and I’ll come over. Got it?”

“Sure.”

“Are you listening to me?”

“Yeah, yeah! I’m listening. Get to the other window . . .”

“And fix the rope onto something *sturdy*.” The fighter looked at him suspiciously. “You got that part, right? ’Cause it’s kinda important.”

Duan drew himself up and forced a carefree smile. “Sure! No problem. Piece of cake. Go along the wall . . .” He got up onto the windowsill and balanced himself there, looking down. “And get to the other window,” he croaked, feeling slightly dizzy.

Duan didn’t suffer from vertigo or anything, but his legs still turned to jelly at the thought of making such a precarious crossing—especially in the rain. The wall itself was covered with masses of rain-slick ivy, as was the narrow ledge he was supposed to inch along. Below was the spiked roof of the entrance hall, rising in a sharp peak, and beyond that an overgrown garden studded with large, jagged boulders. He swallowed, his throat gone dry. *If this rope breaks, I’m dead!*

Olba poked him in the back. “Quit sightseeing, kid!”

“Aaaaah!” Duan flailed his arms for balance. “Don’t do that, Olba!”

This is it, he thought. My chance to prove myself! Or . . . fail.

Screwing up his courage, Duan stepped out onto the narrow ledge.

Immediately, he realized that this was a terrible idea. For one thing, even pressed up against the wall, the wind drove the rain directly into his eyes—he could barely see a thing. He reached around for a handhold amid the mass of ivy and discovered it was as slick as if it had been coated with grease, and not only that, it wasn’t deeply rooted.

Behind him, Olba let out some rope and squinted into the rain. “This is no time to nap,” he chided. “Get moving!”

With Check's help, Duan managed to find a handhold, and then another. Slowly and steadily, he inched his way across, sliding his boots along the narrow ledge. It was slow going, and by the time he was a few feet away from the window, he was totally exhausted. It was all he could do to cling to the wet ivy.

As if on cue, the rain began pouring down even harder. He cursed his soaked clothing, which started weighing heavily on him, and tried not to think of the spikes on the roof below. Why hadn't he taken off his backpack before exiting the window? And his sword? He felt like he carried a thousand pounds.

"You look like a drowned cat," commented Olba, leaning out the open window.

"Would you *shut up*?" Duan responded through gritted teeth. "This isn't so easy!"

"Ha ha ha!" The fighter laughed blatantly at him now; if looks could kill, Duan would have struck Olba dead at that moment.

"If you think you can do better, why didn't you go first?" Duan shot back.

"Are you kidding? I wouldn't miss this for the world!" His eyes twinkling, the fighter made a big show of kicking back against the windowsill. He brought out his hip flask and took a swig, then mockingly toasted Duan. "It's the best show in town."

"Well then, be quiet! I'm trying to concentrate."

"Oh, sure. Sure!" Still chuckling, Olba ducked back inside the window.

Duan turned back to the wall, red-faced. Taking a deep breath, he started again. *Come on, almost there. Don't look down.* At last the far windowsill came into view, just within his grasp. Stretching as far as he could, he reached out—

“Danger! Danger!” Check’s shriek pierced the air.

“Dammit, Check! Don’t scare me like that!” Duan called out in a shaky voice, as he clung to the ivy for dear life. “Where? I can’t see anyth—”

“Down! Look down!” The panicked grinia wheeled above his head.

“Down?” Craning his neck awkwardly, Duan turned as far as he dared and looked down.

There, gazing up at him from the roof, was a monster. It had the head of an eagle and the body of a lion.

Duan groaned. He had no difficulty recognizing it this time. “Oh no—the griffin!”

Clinging to the ivy with all his strength, Duan did the only sensible thing: he yelled for help at the top of his lungs. “Olbaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

“What, you’re there already?” Olba stuck his head out the window, flask in hand. “Okay, get that window open and—” Seeing the look on Duan’s face, he stopped short. “What’s the matter?”

“Down . . . there,” Duan squeaked, motioning with his chin toward the roof below.

Olba looked down. There amid the spikes on the roof, stood the griffin, dripping with rain and looking none too happy about it. The beast cocked its eagle head toward Olba, fixing the fighter with its fierce blue eyes.

“Oh, crap.” Olba sighed. “We didn’t actually kill that one, did we?”

Duan shook his head, staring at Olba with wide eyes.

“Okay.” Olba tucked the flask into his belt. “Stay calm, Duan. I’ll be right back.” And Olba’s head disappeared again.

Duan tried to stay calm. He thought he did a pretty good job of it, too. But the griffin had other ideas. Seeing Duan

clutching helplessly at the ivy, it narrowed its eyes and crouched back on its powerful haunches, spreading its wings. Then, with a piercing shriek, the monster launched itself into the air, coming straight for him. Check, who still hovered over Duan's head, veered away with a terrified squawk.

Emitting a shriek of his own, Duan lunged desperately for the nearby casement window. His fingers closed over the windowsill just as the griffin, with a piercing cry, struck the wall. Its claws raked the spot Duan had just vacated. Bits of wet ivy and brick flew everywhere.

Screeching in outrage at having missed its prey, the griffin flapped its huge wings and drew away from the wall, gaining height for another pass.

The force of displaced air from the griffin's wings buffeted Duan as he dangled just below the casement window, gripping the sill for dear life. "Olbaaa!" he shrieked. "Heeeelp!"

"Shut up and get inside as fast as you can!"

Olba edged out onto the ledge without a rope or any kind of support at all. He held his dagger between his teeth; his powerful legs moved him along the ledge and toward Duan with astonishing swiftness, while his fingers, with a strength and dexterity beyond anything Duan had ever seen, scuttled like crabs from handhold to handhold. On his face—despite the pelting rain, the weight of the heavy backpack he hadn't paused to remove, and the certain death that awaited his slightest misstep—was a look of pure exhilaration.

He's actually enjoying this! Duan realized with a mix of admiration and horror.

Olba pulled the dagger from between his teeth with one hand, even as he clung to the wall with the other. Waving his weapon wildly, he drew the beast's attention.

It was working.

“Don’t just hang there like a dummy, dummy!” he shouted to Duan. “Get inside the window like I told you!”

With a strength born of terror, Duan hauled his body up to the windowsill. He heard Check shriek just as the griffin swooped down on Olba.

It was a bitter fight. From his awkward position, Olba could defend fairly well against the griffin’s claws and slashing beak, but he couldn’t strike out with his dagger without risking a fatal fall. Check dive-bombed the griffin’s head at every opportunity, but the baby griffin hardly succeeded in being a nuisance; even when the monster noticed its tiny antagonist, it remained preternaturally focused on its main target: Olba.

The big fighter soon began to tire. Hovering over him with great flaps of its mighty wings, the griffin dodged Olba’s failing dagger thrusts, then, as the fighter fought to regain his balance, lunged with its claws or its beak. At last, the inevitable occurred.

“Aaagh!” Olba cried out as one of the griffin’s claws struck him in the chest. Though his armor protected him from serious damage, the force of the blow knocked him on the ledge and he began to slide down the wall. Only a desperate grab at a thick stalk of ivy stopped him from falling more than a few feet. There was nothing to do now but sheathe his dagger; he would need both hands to climb back to the ledge again.

But Olba had hardly put the weapon away before the griffin was back, aiming its beak at his exposed hand.

“Aaagh!” The fighter roared in agony. Intense pain tore at him, knifing up his arm to the top of his head; for a second, he thought he might pass out. But even as his vision flickered, his long hours of training stood him in good stead. Before his injured hand could surrender its grip on the ivy, his free hand shot out to take its place. Dangling weakly by one hand, Olba

pulled his other hand to his chest. The appendage was a mass of blood; it was hard to see how much damage had been done, but he seemed able to wiggle his fingers.

Great. That's gonna be a big help against this monster! I'll just wiggle my damn fingers at it and maybe it won't rip my freaking head off!

For the first time in his memory, Olba began to feel true fear. The griffin had circled around and was preparing to dive for another attack. The fighter didn't think too much of his chances.

"Olba! The window won't open!"

The kid screamed again. *So what else is new?* Blearily, Olba looked up to the window above, where Duan strained to pull the casement open. "For cripe's sake, kid, just break it!" he shouted back.

"I'm trying, but it won't break!" yelled Duan, hammering uselessly against the glass with both fists. "It must be another spell!"

And then Olba saw something truly terrifying. Distracted by the banging noise, the griffin had switched targets. Instead of coming back to finish Olba off, it now rocketed toward an oblivious Duan.

"Giis! Danger!" screeched Check, flying as close to Duan as he dared.

"Duan, look out! It's coming your way!" shouted Olba.

"What?" Confused by the two warnings, Duan turned . . . and found himself staring into the enraged eyes of a rapidly approaching griffin.

"Aaaaah!"

Recoiling instinctively, Duan lost his balance and fell. The griffin moved too fast to stop or swerve. With a squawk of surprise, it hurtled into the casement window at full speed.

There was an enormous crash as the monster plunged headfirst through the glass.

Duan, hurtling downward, felt a slight tug as his plummeting body was checked by the Coily Coily Rope, which smoothly swung him back toward the first window—knocking into Olba in the process.

“Gaaah!”

Olba took the opportunity to grab hold of the rope himself. Now the two of them swung back and forth beneath the first window like weights on a pendulum.

“Stop poking me with your elbow!” complained Duan as he tried frantically to gain a foothold.

“Me? You’re the one who’s poking!” Olba said as he tried to gain a foothold of his own.

They could hear the furious shrieking of the griffin the whole time and knew it would be on them in a matter of seconds.

Then Check’s voice rang out from nearby: “Check poke!” The grinia had been trying to get their attention. “Giiis! Lion-bird stuck!”

Olba and Duan stopped struggling and looked up. Check was right: the griffin’s shrieking head was stuck inside the window. It beat its wings frenziedly against the wall, trying to extricate itself. But it was no use.

Duan, swinging at the end of the rope, stared open-mouthed at the sight.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” said Olba, and without wasting another second began climbing the rope, hand over hand, ignoring the pain from his still-bleeding appendage. Reaching the ledge, he sidled over to where the griffin was caught. Then, drawing his sword from its scabbard, he began hacking away at the base of the creature’s exposed wings.

The monster's screams grew shrill with pain and rage. "Kaaa! Kaaa!" Its struggles grew more violent than ever as it beat its wings and scrambled with its hind legs, twisting its body in a vain effort to break free.

Olba gave it a kick in the back, nearly losing his balance in the process. "Shut up!" he snarled, and returned to the safer and more effective strategy of sword strokes. "It's payback time, you manufactured menace!"

With an immense effort, the griffin finally jerked its head free of the window, knocking loose more glass and slicing itself badly in the process. Finished with fighting, covered in its own blood as well as Olba's, it turned to flee, spreading its wings to soar aloft. Except they didn't spread. Thanks to Olba, they didn't exactly work anymore.

As it toppled from the window, the griffin craned its neck backward, looking at its ruined wings in bafflement, unable to comprehend what had gone wrong, why it wasn't flying, but was dropping like a stone instead. Its querulous cry was cut off suddenly as it was impaled on the spikes rising from the roof of the entrance hall.

Holding their breaths, Duan, still dangling from the rope, and Olba, perched on the windowsill, watched as the carcass transformed, as if dissolving in the rain, into not one but two wooden figures: a lion and an eagle.

"Wow." Duan exhaled, exhausted. "That was a close one."

Olba shook his head wearily. "You said it, kid. I—"

He was interrupted by a dinging sound from inside his shirt. Looking down, he saw a fading glow. He reached in with his good hand and pulled out his Adventurer Card.

"Well, whaddaya know?" he said.

"Hey! You leveled up?" As exhausted as he was, Duan couldn't help but be excited. "That's great! What level are you on now?"

“Fourteen.” Olba shrugged and put his card back under his shirt. “The points from that bull-headed guy downstairs must have registered too. This one couldn’t have been more than fifty points, same as the other marionettes.”

“Yeah, but—dude! You’re at Level 14! That’s so awesome. Congratulations.”

“Thanks.” With his back to Duan, Olba bound up his wounded hand with a strip of cloth torn from one sleeve of his shirt. He didn’t want the kid to make a big fuss over what he told himself was nothing but a scratch. “C’mon, we better get moving, before those hags get up to more of their tricks. There could still be more monsters out here.”

“Yeah, I guess there’s no point in us hanging around.” Duan grinned and, finding a foothold, started scaling the overgrown wall. “Get it? *Hanging?* Hanging around?”

Olba groaned. “Just climb, smart guy, just climb.”

CHAPTER 20:

YOU CAN TAKE THE NEXT ONE



“Hags?!” With a toss of her purple hair, Ogma slammed the heavy hand mirror down on the table with such force that it shattered. Sleeping peculese squeaked and scurried away as shards of glass scattered in all directions.

“Did you hear what he called us? This is absolutely unforgivable, Samra. We need to do something! They’ve escaped from the stairwell and killed the griffin.” She drummed her long purple nails on the table, fuming. “Why, I’ll cut them to pieces while they’re still alive and chuck them into my cauldron. Of all the nerve! *Hags*.” She spat out the offending word.

Samra just chuckled, twirling her pink ringlets at the end of her fingers. “Ogma, relax. Everything’s under control. Don’t you realize which room they’re about to enter?” She looked up at her sister knowingly.

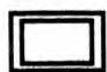
“Hmm?” Arranging her hair after her outburst, Ogma raised a perplexed eyebrow at Samra. The purple-haired witch picked up the cracked hand mirror, which magically reassembled at her touch; the broken shards melted together, rippled, and then revealed the image of Olba and Duan climbing through the window shattered by the griffin.

Seeing this, Ogma’s purple lips curled into a smile of recognition.

“Oh, I remember! That’s the room where—ha ha ha ha!” Ogma began laughing so hard that she had to put the mirror back down. Samra, watching her, began giggling as well.

“Really, Ogma—you are so funny sometimes!” The two of them squealed with glee at the thought of what awaited the adventurers.

If the room in which they sat had not been so dimly lit, however, they might have stopped their laughing. Their perfect porcelain skin, usually as smooth and creamy as milk, was now crisscrossed with fine lines. The creases covered their bodies like a delicate spider web, not only their faces, but also their hands and feet. But neither sister had noticed this yet. They went on laughing as their complexions began to fade and crinkle, so slowly that it was almost imperceptible.



After kicking out the remaining shards of glass in the window and lifting Duan into the mansion, Olba climbed in himself. They were in a small room with no doors and seemingly bare walls. But Olba didn’t have time to examine the place more thoroughly, as he dropped to his knees immediately, clutching his wounded hand and wincing in a sudden onslaught of pain. He’d tried to hide his injury from Duan and to deny its seriousness to himself, but it had caught up with him at last.

Duan, meanwhile, extricated himself from the Coily Coily Rope, letting its reel fall to the floor, then removed his backpack and ruefully examined his dripping clothes. "Man, I'm soaked," he said, beginning to shiver. "I wish—" He broke off as he saw Olba kneeling beside a puddle of blood.

"Olba, your hand!" Duan hurried to the fighter's side. "Better let me take a look."

Olba gasped as Duan pulled away the cloth wrapping he had used to staunch the flow of blood. When Duan saw the extent of the injury, he gasped too.

"Friend hurt! Chaa!" said Check, who had flown down for a closer look.

"How bad is it?" groaned Olba.

"Bad enough." Duan dashed over to his pack, pulled out a water flask, and rushed back to Olba. He washed the wound, cringing at how deep it was. Olba glanced at it, paled, and cursed under his breath. White bone gleamed through the torn, bloody flesh. And no sooner did Duan wash the blood away than it started flowing again. "I need to stop the bleeding somehow . . ."

"Giiia!" squawked Check, who had watched this process with interest. "Check help! Help friend!"

Duan glanced over to the baby grinia. "This is a deep wound, Check. Is your magic strong enough?"

"Check try!"

"Okay. Give him a Heal spell. Better throw in a Cure spell while you're at it."

"Giis!" The grinia closed his eyes and put his three-fingered forepaws together as if he were praying.

Olba looked on skeptically. "Are you sure this is gonna work? Shouldn't he be chanting or something?"

"Just wait," Duan reassured him.

Check opened his eyes and breathed gently over Olba's wound. The moment he did so, the throbbing pain in Olba's hand vanished as if it had been a dream. The fighter sighed and let slip an admiring, "Wow!" as the bleeding stopped and the ragged gouge in his hand began to close. In a matter of seconds, the magic faded, leaving behind a much smaller and less severe wound.

"Giii-ia!" said Check, slumping with exhaustion.

"I think that's about the best he can do," Duan said somewhat apologetically. "Check is still quite young and his magic isn't at full strength yet."

"Are you kidding? This is terrific!" Olba flexed his hand happily.

"We should still disinfect the wound and bandage it properly," Duan said. "Otherwise it could get infected or leave a scar."

Olba only laughed. "Forget it, kid. We've already wasted enough time." He turned to Check. "You may be small, little grinia, but you've got a big heart," he said with sincere appreciation. "The heart of a hero."

Check's little chest swelled up with pride; he held his head up high and nodded at Olba. "Gi-is!" he said with a vigorous nod—so vigorous, in fact, that he knocked himself over.

Laughing, Olba stood up stiffly. "Anyway, we should get out of these wet clothes before we do anything else." He glanced at Duan, who looked as if he'd had a bucket of iced water dumped on his head; the kid still shivered. "Er, you do have a change of clothes, don't you, kid?"

"N-not really," Duan said through chattering teeth. "When the army r-ran off, there wasn't a l-lot left to p-pack."

"You can borrow some of mine," Olba replied. He shrugged out of his backpack and rooted around inside for

something that would fit Duan's scrawny frame. Peering in the fighter's pack, Duan was mildly surprised; he had expected it to be a disorderly mess, but its contents were arranged with military precision.

"Hey," said Olba, as if the thought just occurred to him, "that griffin. I should have let you kill it off, Duan. How many more points do you need to level up?" He tossed a clean shirt and a pair of pants over to Duan.

Duan caught them in midair and began peeling off his wet clothing. "Around eighty, I think."

Since he's at Level 14, he probably can't imagine why it's taking me so long to get to Level 2, Duan thought, blushing a bit behind Olba's huge shirt as he struggled to get it on.

The fighter didn't notice Duan's embarrassment; he just nodded. "Ah. So you wouldn't have leveled up anyway."

"Well, no. But even fifty experience points is huge for me!"

"Right. You can take the next one, then."

Take the next one? Duan popped his head out of the fighter's big shirt and looked at Olba in surprise. "What, you mean *kill* it? If I could do that . . . Well, I would have leveled up ages ago, Olba!"

The fighter laughed. "Well, don't worry. You'll get there." Olba drew out dry clothes for himself, then pulled his shirt over his head. When Duan saw his exposed back, he gasped.

The fighter was covered with scars. Across his back, down his arms, over his chest and shoulders—there wasn't an inch of skin that wasn't scored by an old injury. Some were quite large; the biggest, an angry welt about an inch wide, ran from his shoulder to his armpit.

Hearing Duan's sharp intake of breath, the fighter turned and blinked at him.

“What? Oh, these?” He looked down at his own scarred shoulders and glanced back at Duan with a shrug. “Yeah, well, you know. You don’t get to Level 14 without . . . er, a lot of things happening.” He looked away, a little embarrassed by Duan’s stare.

Duan gulped and went back to pulling on the fighter’s oversized pants.

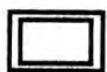
Of course, he thought. He must have been on loads of quests like this one. And harder ones! No wonder he wasn’t too concerned about his hand! I can only imagine . . .

He found himself thinking of Gaeley, his older brother, who had gone off to join the army and seek adventure. He had no idea where Gaeley was right now. He hoped that he was all right.

Gaeley’s probably got a few scars of his own by now, he thought. He remembered what his brother had said to him, in what seemed now like another time, another life:

“I want to see how far my strength can get me in the outside world.”

Duan rolled up the long, baggy sleeves of Olba’s shirt with fresh determination. *Right. Time to start training.*



Once they were in dry clothes, Olba and Duan looked around the room they had fought so hard to enter. Their examination confirmed Olba’s earlier impression—with one exception. The room was small, devoid of furnishings and exits, but the walls were not bare: a painting hung on the far wall. Had it been there before? Olba wasn’t sure.

Duan sighed. “Don’t tell me we’re going to have to climb back out the window!”

But the more experienced Olba had already approached the painting. “Did you notice this here before?” he asked, motioning for Duan to follow.

“Huh?” Duan blinked and advanced suspiciously toward the far wall. “I don’t know. I don’t think so.” He glanced at the baby grinia perched on his shoulder. “What about you, Check?”

“Not see! Chaa!” Check eyed the painting nervously.

“Man, whoever painted this needs some therapy,” Olba said, shaking his head as he studied the canvas. In garish colors, it depicted a vast crowd of people, each being tortured in a uniquely cruel way. “I don’t know much about art, but I know what I like. And this I *don’t* like.”

Figures writhed in postures of agony across the colorful surface: a woman about to be slaughtered by several kitchen utensils that seemed to possess a gleeful life of their own; a woman being flayed alive by a horned demon wielding a whip of barbed wire; a man impaled on a spit and being slowly roasted alive over a roaring fire as demons looked on, laughing hysterically; a man lying flat on his back on the floor of a tiny room, arms upraised against a descending ceiling that would soon squash him like a watermelon while, in a far corner, a grinning demon gestured to the man as though taunted him.

Rivers of blood flowed from the tormented captives and collected in buckets, which demons drank through long, loopy straws made of human bones.

“Ew,” said Duan.

“Giis!” Check clung to Duan’s neck and shuddered.

Olba shrugged. “Well, like I always say, you can’t judge a painting by what’s on the surface: it’s what’s underneath that counts!” And so saying, he grabbed one edge of the frame as casually as if it had been hanging on the wall of his own home.

“Ahh!” Duan jumped back. “You touched it!”

Olba turned and glared at him, annoyed. “Yeah, so?”

“Well, back in the other room you jumped all over me for touching the window without checking for traps first.”

“I *did* check and it seems clear,” Olba responded curtly. “Would you like to examine it for traps yourself, *sir*, since you know so much about them?”

Duan blushed and shook his head. “No, I guess not. Sorry, Olba.”

“Sheesh.” Mumbling something under his breath about amateurs, Olba turned back to the painting and grasped the edge of its heavy gilt frame. “See, Duan, when you’ve been an adventurer as long as I have, you find yourself in similar situations often enough that you start to see patterns. You learn what to look for. Like, for example, where there’s a painting,” he grunted, lifting the frame off the wall, then letting it drop to the floor with a thud, “there’s frequently a hidden door.”

Duan was dumbstruck. Olba was right: behind the painting was an opening in the wall, just big enough for a man to pass through.

Check, squawking excitedly, flew from Duan’s shoulder and hovered at the edge of the opening, peering inside. Duan leaned in after him. The opening wasn’t a passage leading sideways but instead a hole that dropped straight down into another room directly below. This room was as void of furnishings as the others, but it did have two large windows that extended from the floor all the way to the ceiling, a dusty old carpet covering the floor, and most important, a door.

“Looks like we hit the jackpot, kid. How much do you want to bet that door leads straight to the witches. All we have to do is get down there. Where did you put the Coily Coily Rope?”

“It’s back there on the floor. I didn’t know what to do with it—the hooked end is still attached to that pillar back in the other room.”

“Right. Damn, I forgot about that.” Olba drew back from the opening and walked over to the broken window, where the reel end of the Coily Coily Rope lay amid glass shards and griffin blood. He picked it up and began to walk slowly back to Duan, letting the rope play out of the reel. “You know, I think it might be long enough. Put on your pack, kid—we’re going down!”

Duan groaned. He felt pain in muscles he hadn’t even known he’d had, and the meal he’d eaten in the kitchen seemed like a very long time ago. “Man, adventuring takes a lot out of you!”

Olba laughed. “Especially when you weigh ninety-eight pounds,” he teased, indicating Duan’s scrawny frame. “Have you considered taking up a different line of work?”

“You’re not the first to suggest it,” Duan grumbled through gritted teeth as he fetched his backpack and slung it onto his shoulders.

“You should learn magic,” Olba suggested. “Or why not become a bard? With a pretty face like yours, you’d be a real hit!”

“Shut up!” Duan could feel his face going red again. “You sound just like the Adventurer’s Support Group.”

“Sorry—did I strike a nerve?” Olba snickered.

“Hurry up and climb down, will you?”

Olba just grinned.

“Oh no,” squeaked Duan. “Not me. Not again.”

“You can’t expect me to go first. I’m injured!” The fighter held up his wounded hand and smirked.

Duan sighed and took the rope from Olba, tossing the reel down the hole. When he gazed in after it, he saw that it dangled a few inches above the carpet, fully uncoiled at last. “Man, that is one long rope.”

“Quit stalling,” Olba replied, shoving him in the back.

Duan sighed again. Gripping the rope tightly, he squirmed through the hole, then lowered himself hand over hand into the room below. Check hitched a ride on his shoulder, wrapping his long tail around Duan’s neck.

Duan’s arms ached. As he descended, he examined the room by the light of its two large windows, but he saw nothing that he hadn’t already glimpsed from above: bare walls, dusty rug, door. *Are the witches really waiting behind that door?* he wondered as he stepped onto the floor. *And Agnis . . . Will we find her there too?*

“Wow, these witches aren’t much for furniture, are they?” said Olba, shimmying down the rope right behind Duan like a monkey down a vine.

Oh yeah, he’s so injured, Duan thought, shaking his head as he watched the fighter’s agile descent.

Olba hopped lightly to the floor beside Duan. “Hey, instead of using their magic to make monsters, maybe they ought to conjure up an interior decorator!”

“At least this room has a door,” said Duan.

“Right,” said Olba. But then his expression changed. A look of disbelief came over his features. “Uh-oh.”

“What?” Duan looked around nervously, but everything looked normal to him.

“I hate to break it to you, kid, but that’s not a real door.”

Duan’s jaw dropped. But now that he looked at it more closely, he saw that Olba was right. The door had been painted on the wall in a style cleverly designed to fool the eye. From the floor above, it had appeared to be a real door, but now the illusion was plain.

Olba drew his sword. “It’s a trap!” he barked. “Get back up the rope, quick!”

Duan wasn't about to argue. But before he had taken even a step toward the Coily Coily Rope, there came a loud, metallic screech like large gears grating against one another.

In the next second, the Coily Coily Rope fell to the carpet between them with a dull thump. Duan and Olba looked at the severed rope, then at each other, then up at the ceiling. The hole they had come through was gone.

"Oh crap," said Olba. "That was my best rope too!"

Suddenly, the metallic grating noise resumed.

"Does the ceiling look a bit . . . lower to you?" Duan asked.

"Giis! Giis!" Check flapped about in alarm, flying this way and that, his cries barely audible over the grinding noise from above. "Danger!"

"I hate those witches," said Olba.

"What are we gonna do?" asked Duan frantically.

"Don't panic, kid. I'll break us out!" Olba dashed to the windows, but thick iron bars slid over them before he could get there, and not even his prodigious strength mattered then. With a curse, he began to search for another way out, banging on the walls with the pommel of his sword. But it was no use. There was nothing.

And all the while, the ceiling continued its steady descent. A further twist in the witches' cruel trap soon became apparent: as the sinking ceiling began to cover the windows, the light in the room faded. It wouldn't be long before there was no light left at all.

"Dammit!" Olba kicked at the "door" in frustration. "I've had it! Come out and fight, you gutless old hags! Do you hear me? Show yourselves, you spineless cowards!"

There was no response.

Cursing steadily, Olba resumed kicking at the wall as if determined to break it down. Check continued zooming about the room and squawking in terror.

In the midst of it all, Duan stood motionlessly, as if lost in thought. And in fact, he was trying desperately to remember something about the painting upstairs—a minute detail that stood out from all the other horrific torture—continued to haunt Duan.

The man being burnt alive; the woman being whipped . . . And then there was the guy about to be crushed between the ceiling and the floor, just like he and Olba and Check were about to be crushed, squashed flatter than pancakes. There had been a demon taunting the man.

Yet perhaps it wasn't really taunting him after all. Perhaps it wanted to help. Duan tried to recall the exact position of the demon in the painting. Where had it been gesturing from? *Was it the wall? The ceiling? The floor?* His brow furrowed as he tried to summon the image he'd so briefly glanced at.

The ceiling dropped lower and lower; Olba could now touch it with his hand. *I don't mind dying so much*, the fighter thought grimly to himself. *Death has always been close. But to check out like this, without an enemy to face . . . It's undignified. Yeah, that's what it is!* It bothered him too, though he never would have admitted it aloud, that he hadn't been able to save the girl or the kid. Or even the damn grinia. *Poor kid's probably terrified! Maybe I can at least calm him down.* That was when he noticed Duan standing there in the middle of the room with his eyes closed.

"Duan, what are you doing?" Olba yelled in exasperation. He wasn't able to stand up straight anymore; crouching down, he gazed at Duan, whose head was getting bumped by the ceiling.

"Shoot!" Duan balled up his fist and struck it against his hand as he squatted beside Olba. "I can't figure out where it was!"

"Where what was?" They crouched lower as the ceiling continued to descend.

"The demon!" Duan shouted over the squealing of mechanical gears.

"The what?"

"The demon! The demon!" Duan grabbed Olba by the collar and shouted right in his face. "The freaking demon!"

"The . . . *demon?*"

"Yes! Where was it coming from?"

"Have you lost your mind? What are you talking about?"

"Quiet!" Duan put a finger to his lips. "I have to think!"

Olba stared at him open-mouthed as Duan continued to rack his brains. *I've got to calm down. Think, think! The ceiling, the wall, the floor, where was it? Ah, it's no use, I can't remember.*

Olba pushed against the ceiling, but even his strength couldn't stop the inexorable mesh of the big gears, which pressed the ceiling down farther and farther. Duan threw himself flat against the floor, trying not to panic. When suddenly . . .

The floor. Yes. It was coming from the floor!

"Aaargh!" Olba strained to buy them just a few more minutes of life.

Duan crawled across the carpet, inspecting it desperately in the faint glimmer of light remaining. All at once he saw the right corner of the carpet bounce slightly. Rubbing his eyes in disbelief, Duan looked again. A small, furry head poked itself out from under the carpet. It had colorful fur, and when it turned around, it blinked in terror at Duan with its single eye.

Duan's heart leapt. A peculese! It looked like the same one that had gotten away from them in the kitchen . . .

"Olba, look! Look!"

"I'm . . . kind of . . . busy right now, Duan."

"You've got to look!"

"What is it . . . now? Another . . . damn demon?"

“No, a peculese!”

“A what?” Olba glanced over. “Well, why didn’t you say so?” He rolled to the side and started crawling across the room, the ceiling just inches above his head.

Check came fluttering right behind him. The baby grinia was silent now, a look of grim determination tattooed on his tiny features.

The peculese’s eye grew as wide as a saucer at the sight of Duan, Olba, and Check all hurrying in its direction. “Eeep!” it cried and ducked back down under the carpet.

Duan got there first. Pulling back the corner of the carpet, he exposed a narrow opening in the floor. How deep it went and what lay at the bottom he could not tell. But at least it was a way out.

“See? See?” Duan pointed excitedly.

“Giii!” Check zipped right down the hole.

“Hurry up, Olba!” Duan called frantically.

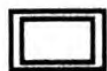
“Don’t wait for me, kid!”

“I can’t just leave you!”

“This is no time to argue!” Lunging forward, Olba shoved Duan roughly into the hole.

“Aaaah!”

Then, at the last second, as the fighter felt the ceiling press against the top of his skull like the boot of a giant, he rolled into the hole himself. With a mechanical clank and thud, the ceiling met the floor, and the last of the light winked out.



“Ow! Get offa me—”

“Well, stop resting your backpack on my head!”

“I’m trying to—ouch!”

“Is that your foot?”

“Giiiiis!”

“Oops. I think that was Check.”

Duan, Olba, and Check had barely escaped being sandwiched between the floor and the ceiling, but they had no idea where they had escaped *to*—only that it was small, tight, and pitch-black.

Olba’s sigh rose out of the darkness. “Of all the people in all the world to get tangled up in the dark with, I get *you*.”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?” Duan’s voice grumbled.

“Well, you may have a pretty face, but you’re not exactly a *girl*.”

“I’m not sure how comfortable I feel about that comment,” came Duan’s reply after a moment. “Especially when you’re practically sitting on top of me.”

“Oh, be quiet. Where’s the Port-O-Lant?”

“It’s in your backpack.”

“I can’t reach it. Can you get it for me?”

“I’ll try . . .”

“Hey, that’s not my backpack you’re grabbing there, buddy!”

“Sorry . . .” Feeling around in the dark, Duan’s searching fingers finally slipped into the pocket of the backpack that held the Port-o-Lant. “Got it!”

“Y’know, speaking of girls,” Olba mused in the dark, “I wonder how that short-tempered princess is doing.”

“Oh yeah.” Duan felt guilty; in all the excitement, he had forgotten about Agnis. “And K’nock, too! I hope they’re okay.”

“Well, they should be able to manage. They’re both a lot tougher than you.”

“Hey, that’s not fair! I—”

“Just kidding, kid! Ha ha ha!”

“You’ve got a weird sense of humor, Olba! Anyone ever tell you—ack!” The rest of Duan’s words were cut off as Check’s flapping wings hit him in the face.

“Giiis!” The grinia began squawking. “Danger! Thing here! Danger!”

“Dammit!” Olba struggled in the dark. “Where’s that Port-o-Lant?”

Duan turned the key to light the lantern and a warm glow illuminated the cramped space. Immediately, they could see why Check was kicking up such a fuss. Cowering a few feet away was the peculese they had seen earlier.

“Eep!” the little monster cringed and trembled, blinking its single eye rapidly in terror.

“Aw, poor little guy.” Holding the Port-o-Lant aloft in one hand, Duan held the other out to the peculese, speaking soothingly. “It’s okay, we won’t hurt you. Come on, we owe you our lives! If it weren’t for you, we’d have—hey!”

He called out, but the peculese had disappeared. Duan couldn’t see where it had gone. Raising the lantern, he looked around—and saw a red light shining through a small hole under the wall.

“Hm. He must’ve gone in—huh?”

As he leaned against the wall to get a better look into the hole, Duan felt it shift slightly. He pushed harder, and the whole wall moved inward with a rusty, creaking sound. For a moment, he was blinded by dazzling, multicolored light.

“Wow!” Duan covered his face and blinked.

As his eyes adjusted to the brightness, Duan realized he stood in a long corridor. Light streamed in from stained-glass windows high up at the far end. It was sunset, and the slanting light shown directly in his eyes, painting him with

squares of gaudy color: red, blue, gold. He wandered into the quiet corridor, treading on soft carpet and gazing in awe at the beautiful window. His companions crept out behind him.

"I guess it stopped raining," Olba commented.

"Giis!" Check flew up into the vivid beams of colored light. "Pretty!"

The door they had just exited appeared to be an ordinary door similar to others lining the hallway. At the far end, below the stained-glass windows, the top of a double staircase was visible: the same one from earlier, near where the bonehead had attacked them. But the landing was empty; there was no sign of demonic dogs.

"What do you think happened to those monsters?" Duan looked around apprehensively.

Olba shrugged. "Dunno."

"It's so quiet," said Duan, suddenly realizing he was whispering. Olba was whispering too. The place had the hushed feel of a cathedral. Even Check was uncharacteristically quiet as he settled on Duan's shoulder. Duan and Olba tiptoed down the hall cautiously, not wanting to disturb the peace—or anything else that might be lurking about.

When they reached the staircase, the pair craned their necks to see the room where they had left the two boneheads below, locked in battle. Check flapped to a perch on the railing.

"I wonder what happened to K'nock," Duan whispered.

"Probably still sitting in front of the bathroom, waiting for Agnis to come out," said Olba. "That is one stubborn feline."

Olba and Duan glanced at each other. Without a word, they both knew they were thinking the same thing: *Did the boneheads get him?*

"I'm going down there," Olba announced.

“No.” Duan laid a hand on his friend’s shoulder. “Let me go.”

Olba blinked at Duan in surprise. “You?”

“I can’t keep hanging back forever. You said it yourself—if I ever want to advance, I’m going to have to take some risks.” Seeing the look of concern on the fighter’s face, Duan smiled encouragingly. “Besides—you did say the next monster was mine!”

Olba studied Duan’s face for a moment, then nodded. “You’ve got guts, kid. All right, go ahead. I’ll watch your back.

“O-okay.” Duan gulped, and shouldered the pack as bravely as he could manage.

“Gi-is!” The baby grinia fluttered after him. “Check help!”

“Thanks, Check. But this is something I need to do alone. You stay with Olba.”

“Check stay.” Somewhat sadly, the grinia fluttered to Olba’s shoulder.

Acutely aware of Olba’s eyes on his back, Duan set off down the staircase. He tried to look resolute, but inside he was terrified. He took a deep breath and concentrated on his steps, holding his breath, careful not to make a sound.

“Psst! Duan!” the fighter hissed from behind him.

“Aaah!” Duan jumped, clutching his chest. “Jeez, Olba! What are you trying to do, give me a heart attack?”

Olba thrust his chin upward, indicating the ceiling. “Don’t forget about the chandelier. It might come crashing down again.”

Duan looked annoyed. “Well, duh,” he responded gruffly. “I’m not going to fall for the same trick twice, you know.”

“No, of course you won’t.” Olba gave Duan a salute. “Carry on!” The fighter folded his arms and, grinning, continued to observe Duan’s progress from above.

No sooner had Duan taken another step than Olba interrupted him again.

“Duan!”

“Ahh . . . *what?*” Duan’s face was livid.

“Oh, nothing. I’m sorry.”

“What is it?”

“It’s just . . . I thought you had something on your face. But it’s gone now. Sorry!” But Olba couldn’t hide the fact that he was laughing; even Check started to titter.

Duan turned to face the fighter, furious now. “What is wrong with you, Olba? You don’t see me cracking stupid jokes when you’re taking the lead, do you?”

“Sorry, sorry . . . Ha ha ha!” Olba doubled over; the more he tried to stifle his mirth, the more he kept laughing. “I’ll stop.”

“Ugh . . .” *He really just enjoys making fun of me! Jeez, how childish!* Duan scowled and continued marching down the stairs, determined to ignore any further interruptions.

“Hey!”

“Okay, that’s it!” Fed up, Duan whirled around. “I’ve had it. Stop it right now, or—”

Duan broke off when he saw the expression on Olba’s face. The fighter was gazing over Duan’s head and down the corridor behind him with a look of surprise and concern. Duan turned to follow his gaze and gulped again.

It was K’nock. The big snow leopard stood in the intersection of the two hallways, blinking up at them with a sober, sad look in his prismatic eyes. Stretched out on his back, thoroughly soaked with rain, blue in the face, and seemingly dead to the world, was Agnis.

CHAPTER 21:

THE THANKS YOU GET



gnis!”

Running down the stairs, Duan reached her first, with Olba and Check in hot pursuit. Together, Duan and Olba lifted the girl’s unconscious body down from the snow leopard’s back and gently laid her on the carpet. K’nock bent down beside his mistress, nuzzling her head with his own as if trying to warm and revive her.

“Easy, big guy,” said Olba. “She’ll be okay, I promise.”

He patted the snow leopard on the neck, then bent over Agnis, rubbing her hand, feeling for a pulse. “Jeez, she’s as cold as ice.”

Duan held his hand a few inches from Agnis’ blue lips. “She’s still breathing.” He looked around. “We need to get her out of these wet clothes.”

“Wasn’t there a fireplace in that other room?” Olba asked, motioning to the door with his head.

Duan nodded. "The one we left the boneheads in—yes, I remember."

"I'll see if the coast is clear."

Olba went to the door to the room and cocked his head against it, listening. Quietly, he turned the doorknob and looked in. Duan watched as the fighter entered the room, then quickly emerged, grinning. A wooden marionette, shaped like a dog, dangled from his hand. "I guess they went back to Toyland," he said.

Despite himself, Duan laughed. "Okay, let's get Agnis in there."

Together, they lifted the unconscious girl and brought her into the room, with Check and K'nock following anxiously behind. The room was in shambles, courtesy of the boneheads' battle. The heavy furniture was upended, the carpet was shoved into one corner, and the wood floor was gouged with claw marks. Skirting bits of broken pottery, Duan and Olba got around the overturned couch and laid Agnis beside the fireplace.

"Nice of them to leave us some kindling," Olba commented as he pulled apart the smashed remains of a wooden end table.

Duan had laid aside Agnis' sodden mantle and began to unbutton her dress when a thought struck him. "Agnis' trunk is still outside!"

Olba struck a match and shrugged. "So?"

"So I need some dry clothes for her. Do you have anything in your pack?"

"You're wearing it." Olba lit the kindling in the fireplace.

"What?"

"The clothes I gave you. I don't have anything else."

Duan blinked. "You only brought two changes of clothes?"

"What do I look like, a traveling fashion model? Anyway, I've got three changes of clothes, not two. You're wearing one, I'm wearing one, and the other got drenched out there in the rain." He scowled at Duan, who had begun snickering at the thought of Olba dressed up as a fashion model. "What's so funny?" the fighter demanded.

"Nothing, nothing . . . But we have to do something. She can't just go around, well, naked." Duan felt the tops of his ears turning hot as he started blushing furiously again.

Now it was Olba's turn to laugh. "Look at you, going red. Fine, she can have this."

The fighter unbuckled his armor and, pulling the shirt off his back, threw it toward Duan. Then he put the armor back on over his bare skin.

"Ah, the macho look," said Duan. "Now you're ready for your modeling assignment."

"Oh, shut up," the fighter growled, turning away to buckle up his armor. Duan began to undo Agnis' dress.

"How's she doing, anyway?" Olba asked.

"She's getting some color back," Duan reported. "I think once we get her into some dry things."

"Hey!" Olba's face lit up as a thought struck him. "Maybe the little guy can cast more healing stuff on her." He turned to the grinia, who sat on the mantle, warming himself by the fire. "How about it, Check? Can you do it?"

Check quizzically cocked his head at Olba, so Duan took that as invitation to answer for him.

"Check can only cast magic a few times a day. He already cast a Heal spell on you earlier, and on K'nock before that. So he needs to rest up a bit before he can do it again."

“Hurmph.” The fighter snorted and looked Check up and down a bit scornfully, as though seeing him for the first time. “Well, what good is *that*?”

“Giis!” Check squeaked, offended. He flew up from the mantel and, zooming over to Olba, gave a kick to the back of the fighter’s head.

“Oww!” Olba turned in surprise, rubbing his skull. “What was that for?”

“Giis!” The furious grinia flew back to the mantelpiece, crossing his little arms and sulking.

“I think that’s grinia-speak for ‘ingrate,’ ” Duan translated, smirking. Check nodded, holding his little head high.

“Well, I don’t think that was necessary,” Olba grumbled.

“Are you kidding?” Duan laughed. “If it were me, I would’ve kicked you harder!”

Suddenly, a moan from the floor interrupted them. Agnis stirred and fluttered her eyelids.

“Hey! She’s awake!” Cradling Agnis’ head in his arms, Duan bent over her eagerly.

Agnis tossed and turned, as if struggling against something; finally her eyes flew open. “Oh! Wh-what . . .” Agnis blinked around the room, disoriented. “Where am I? Ahhh!”

She pulled back with a start, realizing that she was lying in someone’s arms. When she saw Duan, she relaxed a bit. “Oh, it’s you,” she said, looking a bit disappointed. “The novice fighter.”

Novice? “The name’s Duan,” he responded, a trifle hurt. “Duan *Surk*, in case you forgot already.”

“K’nock! Oh, K’nock—am I glad to see you!” Agnis beamed as the snow leopard bounded over and began licking

her cheeks joyfully. Duan had to lean back to avoid being knocked over.

"He brought you to us," Olba said. "What happened?"

"It's kind of complicated." Agnis, still clutching the snow leopard's neck, furrowed her brow in concentration. "To start with, the bathroom was a trap—the door led out into the middle of the forest. I had a couple of narrow escapes out there, which I'll tell you about later. But we don't have to worry about the assassin anymore."

"What, you killed him?" demanded Olba, impressed.

"No, the monsters did that. He actually saved me."

"*Saved* you?"

"I said it complicated! But at last I managed to find my way back to the mansion. The magic barrier that kept us out before wasn't working, so I just opened the door and came in. That's when K'nock found me. The next think I remember—aaaah!"

Agnis stopped in mid-sentence and screamed, realizing that her dress was halfway off. She pulled it around her and glared at Duan. "You little pervert!"

"Wait, it's not what you think!"

"I can't believe it! What, every time I'm unconscious, you gotta pull my clothes off?"

"You were soaking wet! We were afraid you'd freeze to death! Here, here!" Duan held Olba's shirt out toward her, cowering. "Take this! It's dry."

Scowling, Agnis snatched the shirt away from him and stood up. She went to the furthest corner of the room, still glaring furiously at the others.

"Turn around!" she shouted. When she was satisfied that no one was looking, she changed into the big shirt in the blink of an eye.

“Well, she seems to be fine,” Olba murmured to Duan.

“Seriously.” Duan was afraid to move until he heard Agnis announce: “Okay, you can turn around now.”

Turning, Duan felt his heart skip a beat. Olba’s clothes had been baggy on him, but on Agnis’ small frame they were even baggier. The shirt hung to her knees, like a dress. As she turned toward him, he was acutely aware of the flushed skin that peeked out from the wide, scooped neck of the fighter’s oversized shirt, her damp hair falling in dark red ringlets, her rosy cheeks in the firelight.

Duan tried to hide his flustered emotions as Agnis, completely unaware of his discomfort, took a sniff of the shirt she wore and wrinkled her nose in disgust.

“Augh! Where did you get this thing? It smells like a minotaur’s armpit!”

Olba’s mouth dropped open at the insult. “Fine, give it back if you don’t like it! You can walk around naked.”

“You wish!”

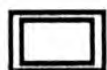
“Oh, come on, don’t be shy. You’re cute—we could use something to look at. And maybe Duan will learn a thing or two!” The fighter winked at Duan, who was not amused at being included in the joke.

“Come on, Olba,” Duan murmured. “Knock it off.”

“Ugh.” Agnis, thoroughly disgusted, picked up her wet clothes from the floor and hung them in front of the fire to dry. “You guys are creepy. As soon as these dry out, I’m taking off this stinky shirt and getting as far away from you two as I possibly can.”

“Whatever,” said Olba with a shrug. He pulled out his hip flask and took a healthy swig.

Duan sighed. “Come on, you guys.”



“Pah.” High up in the witches’ room, Samra slammed her hand mirror down on the table. “Why are they having so much fun? And ‘cute’? I can’t believe a man like Olba is even bothering with that skinny little wretch! Look at her prancing around in that shirt: she’s nothing but skin and bones!”

“And that Duan too,” Ogma chimed in. She had her own hand mirror—and also fumed. “Acting all coy. It’s disgusting! It’s like that little schoolgirl has them all under a spell.”

“It makes me want to puke.”

Ogma drummed her long purple fingernails on the table, lost in thought, then drew herself up and focused on her sister. “Samra,” she announced, “I think it’s time.”

“Time for what?” Samra raised a plucked pink eyebrow.

“To show these fools what a *real* woman looks like!”

Samra squealed and cackled with glee. “Oh, yes, I am so with you on this! Let’s do it together. One, two, three!”

The two witches breathed upon the surface of the mirrors they held in their hands. At the touch of their breath, a fog spread across each glass.

Then a mysterious thing happened. The fog seemed to rise up off the mirrors, back into the mouths of the witches. Only it didn’t dissipate. It grew thicker. As it did, the bodies of the witches grew fainter, turning translucent, until there was nothing left of them but ghostly forms of wavering mist. And then, in a twinkling, that mist was sucked into the mirrors.

The two hand mirrors spun rapidly in the air and clattered against the table where the witches had been sitting. A few napping peculeses, momentarily surprised by the noise, blinked, looked around the empty room, and then closed their single eyes once more.

CHAPTER 22:

CONFRONTATION



While Agnis and Olba bickered, only Check seemed to notice that something was happening in the room. He heard a crackling sound in the fireplace and, flying down to investigate, peered inquisitively into the flames, tilting his head.

One of the logs suddenly crumbled into ash, making the same very crackling noise that had raised his suspicions earlier. Now satisfied, Check was about to turn away when something else caught his eye. The smoke from the furious blaze, which had risen straight up the chimney, now began to drift strangely. Two puffs of smoke separated from the rest and hovered in the air, quivering slightly, as if they were animated. One was pink. The other was purple.

Check rubbed his eyes and looked again. The colored puffs of smoke drifted into the room, and as he watched, they started to shift and grow, taking on definite shapes.

The baby grinia launched himself into the air. "Giiis! Smoke! Danger! Giiis!"

"Now what?" Duan turned, ready to chastise Check for his interruption. Instead, he froze, open-mouthed, at the pink and purple haze. The smoke began to shimmer in the air—and within the haze, he made out the leering faces of two extremely beautiful women.

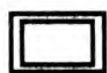
The shimmering smoke settled on the floor and formed into two human figures, about half Duan's height. The figure made of pink vapor struck a seductive pose, throwing her head back and wrapping her pink curls around her finger coyly. The figure made of purple vapor leaned against the pink shoulder of her twin and gazed directly at Duan, smirking. The figures began to grow.

"Olba . . ." Duan tapped the fighter on the shoulder, who then turned to look; Agnis turned around as well. Olba and Duan were both too stunned to speak. Check cowered behind Duan's neck, peering out fearfully, while K'nock let out a low growl.

While restraining the snow leopard, Agnis, stepping forward, addressed the wavering forms that had appeared in front of them.

"I know who you are!" she said angrily. "You're the twin witches Ogma and Samra, aren't you?"

Those are the witches? Duan thought. *But . . . they're hot!* The witches didn't look at all like he had imagined they would.



She knew she was right.

Agnis' eyes blazed with fury. "Answer me, damn you! I'm right, aren't I? You're exactly as my father described you. You changed my mother, Rubis, into a bird. I'm Rubis' daughter,

Agnis.” She paused for a moment, trying to swallow some of her anger. Then, in a shaky voice, she began to plead. “Please, change my mother back. I don’t know if you hold a grudge against us or what, but please, just change her back. I’ll do whatever you want. I’ll do anything! I’ll—”

“Anything?” Samra interrupted with a malicious cackle.

Ogma emitted a peal of laughter and fixed her glittering purple eyes on the princess. “Yes, what will you do? Oh, I’m looking forward to this!”

“I’ll . . .” Agnis paused, searching for the right words to free her mother. “I’ll let you change me into a bird instead!” she replied at last.

The witches’ eyes flew open in surprise; they looked at each other and then burst into laughter.

“Oh! Ha ha ha!” Ogma gasped for breath, wiping tears from her eyes. “I think you misunderstand, Princess.”

“Yes, it’s not like we enjoy going around turning people into birds. It’s not like that at all. Ha ha ha.” Samra was beside herself at the ridiculous notion. “Right, Ogma?”

“Right.” Ogma nodded and turned to Agnis with a look that was almost sympathetic.

“Look, honey, we were asked to do it. That’s all. I mean, we did feel sorry for you and your mother. Well, okay, we didn’t feel all *that* sorry. But we didn’t hate you, either. We were just the hired guns.”

“And anyway, look at you, feeling sorry for yourself.” Samra’s eyes narrowed on the girl. “What a drama queen!”

“I know!” Ogma shrieked with laughter. “Like you’d really take your mother’s place and turn into a bird!”

“She’s just showing off for the guys,” Samra scoffed as she stretched out her vaporous torso, looped it around her sister, and then got right under Agnis’ nose. “Well, that might

fool them, sweetie, but not us. You're just trying to get all the attention for yourself," she hissed.

Agnis turned her away and wrinkled her nose, as if she'd smelled something vile. The look on Ogma's face changed drastically.

"Get out!" Ogma spat the words at her venomously. "You're no use to us, you stupid girl. We already threw you out of the mansion once, didn't we? We were trying to do you a favor. But you didn't get the hint, did you? You had to come crawling back!" Ogma drifted forward, her face a grimace of contempt. "Go home, little girl. Go home to momma bird and be thankful we didn't kill both of you!"

Agnis' mouth dropped open; she was taken aback by the unexpected intensity of Ogma's response.

Duan couldn't help but feel he should intervene somehow, but when he began to step forward, Olba squeezed his shoulder and gave him a look that said: *This is between them. Leave it for now.*

Agnis drew herself up and, with all the courage at her disposal, addressed Ogma calmly and regally.

"It was Queen Ramua who set this up, wasn't it?" she demanded. "I know it was. How much did she give you? I'll double it."

Even wearing Olba's old shirt, Agnis' noble heritage was clearly evident in her resolute bearing and clear words. Duan looked on in admiration. K'nock, too, seemed proud of his mistress. He stood beside her, puffing out his chest, to remind the witches that they were speaking to a princess.

Ogma sneered at the offer. "You think we work for those paper notes and metal coins that you people toss around? Honey, please. There's only one reward that appeals to witches. A clever girl like you should know that already."

“Yes, don’t you realize what Queen Ramua had to give up in order to ask us to do what we did?” Samra raised a pink eyebrow at the princess. “You never gave it a thought, did you?”

“Of course she didn’t.” Ogma nodded. “She never thought of anyone but herself, until her mother turned into a bird. Boo-hoo!”

“That’s not fair!” The words were out of Duan’s mouth before he could stop them; the two witches looked at him suddenly, then laughed at his outburst.

“Ooh, the smart one! You’ll just see how fair it is, sonny.” Leaning in closer to Agnis, Ogma asked in a voice full of scorn: “Tell me, precious. Have you ever thought about why the queen would risk her own life in order to hire us—us witches?”

Agnis shook her head as she whispered a barely perceptible, “No.”

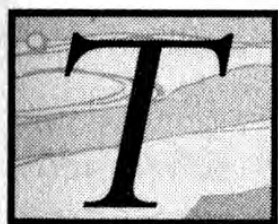
“Well then, I’ll tell you. But once you’ve heard the whole story, you need to run along like a good girl. And don’t come back. Understand?”

Samra, who had been listening from behind with a big grin on her face, slapped Ogma’s hand in a high-five—or at least that’s what Duan thought they were trying to do, as their smoky hands, meeting in midair, seemed to swirl and separate anticlimactically.

But Samra didn’t seem to notice. “That’s right, girl!” she crowed. “Tell it like it is!”

CHAPTER 23:

THE WITCHES' TALE



he witches proceeded to tell Agnis and the others about Queen Ramua. As the second daughter of a prominent duke, Ramua was born into the Fiana aristocratic elite. Like other young ladies of her class, she was taught embroidery, music, and the finer points of etiquette, and unlike her rather horsey older sister, she excelled at these ornamental arts. She had a marvelous singing voice and was an excellent pianist.

When Ramua turned sixteen—an event that was, of course, accompanied by an elaborate coming-out party, in which Ramua was introduced to the *crème de la crème* of Fiana society—her classical beauty and elegant manners caused quite a stir among the court.

Many remarked upon her graceful dancing, and there were murmurs that she was a natural choice for the young and eligible prince. And, indeed, that very night her parents pulled

her aside and, delighted, informed her the king had chosen her to marry his son: the heir to the throne, who would one day reign as Palea IV.

Yes, it was an arranged marriage. Ramua's father was the leading member of a group of nobles opposed to the policies of the king. Because of his great influence, the king's ministers considered him a possible threat, especially since the family had, in centuries past, occupied the throne. Thus a marriage between the two young people was viewed as a way of uniting the two most powerful factions in the kingdom, assuring peace and prosperity for years to come.

Young and naïve, Ramua was overjoyed with the match. So what if it had been arranged? Most royal marriages were. But that didn't mean there couldn't be real love involved. She had only ever seen Palea from a distance, but she had always found him captivating. She couldn't believe her luck in marrying this wonderful man. Only sixteen and marrying a prince! Well, seventeen, since the wedding was scheduled for the following year. But even so, she was beside herself with joy and anticipation. It was the culmination of all her youthful dreams, an honor she had hardly dared hope for.

The night her betrothal was announced, she was unable to sleep—she tossed and turned, jumped out of bed, arranged the things in her hope chest over and over again, jumped back into bed and stared at the ceiling, beside herself with joy.

Engaged to the prince! Squealing and hugging her pillow, Ramua laughed out loud. "This is the happiest day of my life!" she exclaimed to the empty room.

Little did she know it was, in fact, the happiest day of her life; there was no hint of the misery to come.

Ramua did not have a single day of the married life she had envisioned. To start with, the king died in a hunting

accident just before the wedding, and so instead of marrying a prince, she found herself marrying a king, a man who had not only lost a father but assumed all the worries and responsibilities that come with a crown. And that was only part of it. Her new husband was indeed handsome and intelligent, everything a girl could ask for. The day of their wedding, he lifted her veil and she felt her heart skip a beat—she thought she would faint from the excitement. But Palea barely noticed his new bride.

Even as he murmured the wedding vows, he wasn't looking at her, but *through* her. At first she blamed it on his bereavement and the burdens newly thrust upon him. But as the months went by, it became clear to her that Palea's strange attitude was not due to any external circumstances—indeed, external circumstances did not seem to have much of an effect on him one way or the other. His reaction to everything, good or bad, was distant and preoccupied. He always seemed to be looking elsewhere—staring at someplace very far away.

Crushed and bewildered, the young queen tried everything she could think of to please her new husband—dressing in the latest fashions, arranging her hair in different styles, and holding grand garden parties, gathering entertainers from near and far to perform for him and make him laugh. But nothing got the king's attention. He wasn't abusive to her, or even impolite—he just wasn't *there*.

Months and months passed this way until finally, driven to distraction and desperate to speak to someone, Ramua decided to consult her mother, whom she summoned to the castle. And when Ramua saw her mother descending from the carriage, the young queen's eyes welled up with tears. *Finally*, she thought, *I have someone to talk to!*

Seeing her daughter's distress, Ramua's mother pursed her lips and looked puzzled. "Good heavens, my dear. What could possibly be that bad?"

Taking her mother aside to a private garden, Ramua unburdened her heart. She told her mother everything—her husband's distraction, how lonely she was, her complete inability to do anything to please him.

"Is this normal?" she asked, gazing up at her mother with tear-stained eyes.

Her mother answered with a dismissive laugh. "Normal? Who's to say what's normal when it comes to a king? 'Heavy is the head that wears the crown,' and all that. My advice to you, Daughter, is to stop whining and concentrate on giving Palea a son and heir. That will bring him around, you'll see." She gave a satisfied nod, then suddenly leaned closer to Ramua as a disturbing thought entered her mind. "Please tell me you haven't been troubling the king with this nonsense, have you?"

Ramua was a bit taken aback. "N-no . . ."

"Good." Heaving a sigh of relief, her mother patted her on the head and stood up to leave. "Now be a good girl and remember: you're the queen. Try to act like one."

Ramua was shocked. She had attempted to give voice to her fears, to confide in the one person she trusted above all others, and what had she gotten for her trouble? A scolding! But she believed her mother's words and began directing all of her efforts and thoughts toward one purpose: having Palea's child. And soon enough, her plans bore fruit.

When Ramua discovered that she was pregnant, her elation knew no bounds. She ran to the king's private chambers, nearly bursting with the news. "Palea," she cried, barely able to contain her joy, "you are going to be a father!"

Palea glanced up from the book he was reading and regarded her as if he didn't quite remember who she was. "I see," he said at last in his perfectly polite, perfectly distant voice. "Wonderful news, Ramua. Please take every care of your health." Then he resumed his reading.

Ramua was inconsolable after that. Even visits from her older sister and friends could not cheer her up. Ramua's sister had made a respectable marriage for herself, and while it was not nearly in the same rank as Ramua's, she felt obliged, as the older of the two, to give her little sister some advice.

"Ah, stop making yourself crazy," her sister told her. "This is what marriage is like, so you might as well get used to it. Ignore that old stick-in-the-mud. Get out and have some fun! You deserve it." She nudged Ramua in the ribs, leering. "These days, it's just not worth it to be a faithful and virtuous wife, you know."

"Yeah, stop worrying," her friends chimed in. "You're starting to look really tired, you know? Look at you, you hardly have any color in your face."

It was true: the young queen was growing wan and pale. The girl who had charmed the whole capital with her elegant grace had become a mere shadow of her former self.

With the birth of her first child, a girl, Ramua found some solace, and in time she had two more children: another girl, and then a boy, the heir to the throne. But it seemed that with the birth of each of his children, Palea grew more and more distant, more and more preoccupied.

There were days when Ramua found herself overwhelmed with heartbreaking loneliness. The palace, which she had dreamed of living in for so long, seemed like a prison, its cold marble walls a reminder of her isolation. Her eyes would fill with tears for no particular reason, and she would ask herself

how she could go on like this for even one more day. Was this the married life of which she had so often dreamed?

What made everything a hundred times worse was that Ramua never stopped loving her husband. She loved him, in fact, all through their marriage, no matter what disappointments or neglect she endured; inside, that seventeen-year-old girl was still infatuated with her first love, Palea. Every time he entered a room, she felt her heart skip the same way it had on her wedding day. She only longed for his happiness, and the thought that she could not provide it filled her with deep anguish. Had she failed him somehow? Was she not beautiful enough, not kind enough, not intelligent enough to maintain his interest? Racking her brain with these thoughts, she went through her days at the castle full of inner turmoil and depression—but she was careful not to bring up her doubts and fears to Palea, lest she alienate him even further.

In time, and with great inner discipline, Ramua grew to accept her condition. She came to the realization that this was just the way Palea was; nothing would change him, so she might as well give up and be satisfied with loving him from afar. Her children were a great comfort to her; she loved them ardently, and as she watched them grow, their presence filled her life with joy. So she focused her attention on raising them properly and on being a helpful partner to Palea.

Ramua became a model queen in every respect: regal and gracious, if a bit cold and formal, and always at hand for any festivity, charity event, or celebrated cause. Eventually, her constrained routine began to feel natural, and she achieved, if not happiness, at least something approaching contentment with her existence.

It was at about this time, sixteen or so years since her marriage, that Palea brought Rubis back to the castle.

Ramua would never forget the shock she experienced at that moment. It was late in the afternoon, after a thunderstorm. There, in the great entrance hall, stood Palea and Rubis, without a drop of rain on them, being greeted by the servants. Ramua watched from the stairs above.

The face of the king as he introduced Rubis struck a blow to Ramua's heart. She had never seen him look so joyous, so full of life, his face beaming as he spoke with great animation to the nearby courtiers.

"Her name is Rubis. She's an Elementaller who can control the spirit of fire! Isn't that amazing? She found me in the forest; I could hardly believe that such a delicate creature could be an adventurer!" And the king laughed—*laughed!* Out loud! Worst of all, even as he spoke to the others, he could not take his eyes off Rubis. He gazed at her with intent admiration, as though anything this Elementaller said or did was the most wonderful thing in the world.

Ramua was so hurt, she couldn't speak. Without revealing her presence, she turned on her heels and swiftly made her way back to her room. Locking the door behind her, she leaned against it and closed her eyes, choking on rage and humiliation, as hot tears trickled past her cheeks and wet her bosom. The feelings she had bottled up inside all these years finally erupted with frightening force. She wept and wept, alone in her room, until she had no more tears left to cry.

And in fact, after that day, she stopped crying altogether, as if her tears had all dried up inside her. She felt nothing anymore. It was as though her inner turmoil had finally boiled away any feelings resembling sympathy or tenderness, leaving an empty, hardened shell.

Her face set into a frozen, impassive expression. She grew cold and started to look down on people.

As Palea installed his new mistress in the Summer Palace, and the court began to buzz about the change in his affections, Ramua pretended to be unaware of it. But deep inside, she boiled over with rage and resentment against this interloper and her rumoured offspring—for it was now whispered that Rubis was with child, and there was talk that Palea might choose a new heir. When she heard the news of Agnis' birth, Ramua almost collapsed with relief: the child was a girl, and in Fiana, only males could inherit the throne. The succession of Ramua's son was safe . . . for now.

But what if Rubis should produce another child, a boy? Ramua lived in secret dread of this. Yet as the years passed with no further offspring, she began to relax. The notion that she would one day see her son inherit the throne was the only thing that gave her pleasure. Sustained by this vision and by her pride as the queen, she went about her formal routine and did her best not to think too much about anything else.

She did her best, that is, right up until the day that Palea spoke those fateful words to Prince Grith at Agnis' coming-of-age party.

"The choice of successor is one of the most important decisions a monarch can make. The fate of the kingdom and its people depends upon it. A ruler should base his choice not on bloodlines, or gender, but on wisdom. Yes, the person with the most wisdom should rule the land."

Ramua stared at the smiling Palea with burning eyes.

"The person with the most wisdom?" she thought disdainfully. What is he talking about? A man who hasn't even thought once of his own wife—what right does he have to talk about wisdom? Besides, any fool can see that what he's really talking about is the disinheriting of his own son—my son—for the get of his mistress!

And with that, a feeling ignited in Ramua's bosom and began to burn with singular intensity. That feeling was rage.

If she had felt it when she first laid eyes on Rubis, now it was a hundred times worse. She cursed Rubis, she cursed Agnis, and finally, with nothing left to hold her back, no hope of her son's succession, she cursed Palea as well. The love that she had carried with her through all those years of neglect, which had sustained her heart even in the midst of despair, turned suddenly and irrevocably into the bitterest hatred.

How dare he?! she thought, watching the king's inane, pleasant smile as he gazed down at this horrible girl who would take her last pleasure from her. Her youth, her children, her years of loyalty—all would be thrown on the fire so that a red-headed half-breed could sit upon the throne of Fiana? It was an injustice too great to endure.

Ramua remained expressionless through dinner, nursing the rage in her heart until she had a chance to escape. Then, excusing herself from the table, she evaded the party-goers and went directly to the palace library. Perusing the collections, she finally pulled down a thick, dusty tome from one of the highest shelves: *A Miscellany of Spells and Incantations*.

Ramua had dabbled in magic during her early days in the palace, before the birth of her children dispelled her boredom, but she hadn't ever been successful at it. Now her strength of purpose was such that she was sure she could will herself to succeed.

This time it has to work. It has to! she thought.

She leafed through the browning pages and finally came across a spell that looked promising: "Summoning and Controlling Spirits of Malicious Intent."

Skimming down the page, past endless admonishments and disclaimers about the dangers of working with evil spirits, Ramua found the incantation, clasped her hands together, and started chanting. She was sure that she could not fail to

summon the appropriate spirits with the single-mindedness of her intention.

As the party continued into the early morning hours, Ramua remained in the library, chanting as if her life depended on it. As dawn broke, she was on the verge of total derangement. Sweat poured down her forehead and she could scarcely see straight. She was forced to admit that the spell hadn't worked. But she wasn't about to give up. Agnis' coming-of-age celebrations were scheduled for a full week, so she had plenty of time.

Ramua was back in the library the following night. And the night after that. And the night after that. She repeated the spell and chanted others too, until her voice was nothing but a hoarse whisper. But to no avail. It seemed she lacked some fundamental affinity for magic.

She came to this conclusion on the final night of the celebrations. She stood before the open spell book, readying herself to begin, and then abruptly realized that it would be no use. She slammed the book shut as a new idea suddenly occurred to her.

Why bother with magic and malicious spirits, evidently difficult to control, when there were perfectly good assassins available for employment? Or, if worst came to worst, she could do it herself, with a little poison . . .

It's so obvious! I wonder why I never thought of it before?

Kill them.

Kill them!

KILL THEM!

Of course, Ramua realized, being discovered would mean death. She would be executed, and she didn't know what would happen to her children. But Ramua was past the point of caring. Death, she decided, was preferable to continuing to

live a life of constant humiliation. She'd rather be dead than face another day of this torture, smiling regally while her heart was being ripped apart.

It was at this moment that she heard a voice: "Okay, all right already! We're here—what did you want?"

Gasping in surprise, Queen Ramua looked around, and then down at the spell book lying on the desk before her. She blinked, almost unable to believe her eyes. There, standing on the cover, were two tiny women, each about three inches tall. One was dressed all in pink, the other all in purple. They posed haughtily on the leather cover, pouting with impatience.

Ramua realized that the spell had worked after all. She had summoned these two malign spirits to do her bidding! So great was her relief, and her excitement, that she clasped her hands together as if in prayer and cried out in her hoarse voice: "Thank goodness you've come!"

The tiny figures gazed up at Ramua disinterestedly. The pink one appeared to be chewing bubblegum; she blew a pink bubble and popped it noisily, then said: "Hello, I think you meant to say, 'Thank *badness* you've come'!"

"Yeah," the purple one nodded in agreement, "'cause we're super-bad."

As the two of them screeched with laughter and high-fived each other, Ramua stared at them in disbelief.

"A-are you . . . real witches?" Ramua addressed them in a trembling voice.

"We're the twin witches," the purple one explained, indicating herself and her sister. She seemed a bit irritated. "I'm Ogma and she's Samra. Don't tell me you've never heard of us."

"Oh, it's not that, it's j-just," Ramua stammered, a bit embarrassed, "if you don't mind my asking, why are you so small? You look like pixies."

“Ha ha ha!” The witches collapsed in laughter. Then their heads—but only their heads—swelled up to normal size, bobbing like balloons at the end of their stringy necks.

“Is this better?”

“Or how about this?”

As they taunted the queen, their noses turned into long, hooked, warty noses, and their faces became more wrinkled and witchlike. Ramua was so astounded, she thought her heart would stop.

“How’s that? Witchy enough for you?”

Cackling loudly, the witches’ distorted faces shrank down in proportion to their bodies, and they again appeared youthful.

Ogma rolled her purple eyes and pursed her purple lips. “Yeesh,” she said. “The stereotypes we have to put up with.”

“I’m sorry,” Ramua blurted out, trying to get her pounding heart under control. “I certainly didn’t mean to—”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever.” Ogma waved her off. “Anyway, don’t you have a request or something? We’re busy people; we don’t have all day.”

“Yeah, spit it out,” said Samra. “We need our beauty sleep.”

“Wait!” Afraid they would vanish as suddenly as they’d appeared, Ramua forced herself to calm down. “Don’t go—I have lots of things to ask you! First of all, there’s this woman, Rubis. I’d like you to curse her, and kill her too. Then there’s her daughter, Agnis. I’d like her to die as well, but not before she sees what happens to her mother. So if you could curse Agnis so she can’t move, but she has to watch what happens, and then when you’re done with Rubis—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” Ogma held up her hands. “Slow down. Let me explain the ground rules to you here. First of all,

you can't be greedy. You're asking for too much. We can only grant one wish at a time."

"Yup." Samra nodded her head. "That's how we work."

"And secondly, we only grant wishes to people we like."

Ramua inhaled sharply at Ogma's words. *Only if they like me?* Having been so lonely for so long, keeping everything to herself, she had become a bit neurotic. It hadn't occurred to her in a long time that anyone might actually like her. She didn't really believe anyone could.

Ogma saw the troubled look on Ramua's face, and it was as though she could read the queen's mind. She smiled at Ramua. "Hey, don't worry. We like you quite a lot already."

"Yeah." Samra popped her gum, nodding. "We wouldn't have come if we didn't!"

Ramua was relieved. "Oh! Okay." She smiled; it had been so long since she'd smiled a genuine smile that it actually hurt her face a bit. "Only, it's hard to narrow things down to just one wish!"

"We wouldn't know," said Ogma airily. "We get all the wishes we want."

"That's right," said Samra. "I grant her wishes and she grants mine!"

"It's good to be a witch!" Ogma pronounced, at which she and her sister erupted into laughter again.

Ramua wasn't quite sure how to respond, so she just smiled nervously.

At last, when the laughter had died down, Ogma prompted the queen. "Okay, it seems to me you've got two grudges: one against this woman, Rubis, and one against her daughter, Agnis. But really, isn't it the mother who's bothering you the most?"

"Yes." Ramua's eyes lit up. "I can deal with Agnis myself—hire an assassin or something. But Rubis is the one I *really* hate!"

She stole my husband's love, and now she's stealing the throne for her bratty daughter! She's an Elementaller, and—"

There was a loud explosion as the bubble Samra was blowing suddenly popped. "Whoa," she said. "An Elementaller, eh? What kind?"

"Um, fire? Is that important?"

"Important? Important? Why, no, it's not important. Unless by 'important' you mean 'a piece of information that could mean the difference between life and death for Samra and Ogma!'" Ogma answered sarcastically.

"Y-you mean she's too powerful for you to handle?"

"What? How *dare* you imply such a thing! Did you hear that, Samra?"

"I've never been so insulted! Why, I've half a mind to leave right now."

"Please, don't go!" begged Ramua, falling to her knees. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean anything. I don't know very much about magic."

"Hmph," said Samra, rolling her eyes. "*That's* obvious."

"We can handle a fire Elementaller," Ogma added, "only we'll have to prepare ourselves first, cast certain spells to inhibit her magic. Technical stuff you wouldn't understand. Now, any other little surprises you'd care to mention?"

"N-no," Ramua stammered, feeling a bit perplexed. This was all so unfamiliar to her—what if she did something wrong or overlooked something and angered the witches? As she processed this new information, the witches continued to wait, gazing at the queen sourly.

"Should we come back later?" Ogma finally asked icily. "'Cause it seems like you still need some time to—"

"No!" Ramua held up her hand; she had reached a decision. "Rubis. It has to be Rubis. Please, beautiful, cunning

witches, I want you to kill Rubis! And not quickly—make it long and slow and painful!”

“Wow. You’re a scary lady!” Samra exaggerated this sentiment by hiding behind a vase of flowers, and then—of course—giggling like a witchy nutcase.

“No kidding!” Ogma laughed and turned to her sister. “Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, eh?”

Ramua turned red with embarrassment at that comment but soon regained her composure. “Well, can you do it?” she demanded.

Ogma’s expression turned serious. She shook her head. “*Can* we do it? Of course. *Will* we do it? Sorry, but no. We don’t do murder for hire, at least not Elementallers.”

“Yeah, that’s not covered in our liability,” Samra chimed in, her face popping out from behind the flowers. “They stick together, those Elementallers. Kill one, and the rest of ’em come after you.”

“Oh.” Ramua looked crestfallen.

“But look,” Ogma continued, “there are ways to make someone suffer that are much, much better than killing them.”

“Really?” Ramua looked from one to the other curiously.

“Oh, yes. We’ve got plenty of options.”

“Lots of great curses,” Samra assured her. “The best. The most beautifully constructed curses you could possibly imagine. You won’t be sorry.”

“Like what?” Ramua asked, unconvinced.

“Well, we could turn her into a bird, for example.”

“Or a lizard.”

“Or a cockroach.”

“Or a dog!”

“Ha ha ha!” Samra was beside herself with laughter. “How about an ugly frog?”

“Oh, Samra.” Ogma winced. “A frog? That’s so clichéd.”

“No. I like to think of it as a ‘classic’!”

“Ugh . . .” Ogma rolled her eyes and continued to bicker with her sister as Ramua thought it over. Finally, the queen gave a nod.

“A bird,” Ramua said decisively. “Yes. There’s even a birdcage in her room we could use. It’s perfect!” She faced the witches, her eyes wild with anticipation. “Please, change her into a bird. And when you do, I’ll clip her wings so she can’t fly!”

“Ha ha ha—you really are scary! Remind me not to get on your bad side,” Samra joked.

Ogma shrugged. “You can do whatever you like to her afterward.” She looked at the queen, a malicious smile curling at the edge of her lips. “But now—we need to discuss *payment*.”

“Oh, that’s not a problem,” replied Ramua lightly. “Money is no object. You can have whatever you desire from the royal coffers.”

“Money? I don’t think you understand.” Smiling, Ogma began to grow larger and larger, until she was the same height as the queen. Basking in the queen’s confusion and nervousness, she came closer and deliberately drew out her words: “I’m not . . . talking about . . . money.”

“W-well then . . .” Ramua glanced from one to the other as Samra, grinning, started growing larger as well. “What is it you want?”

“Don’t worry!” Samra, full-sized now, patted the queen’s shoulder reassuringly. “We don’t want much. Just, say . . . ten years of your life!”



The vaporous purple figure that was Ogma looked tired. She leaned back against the fireplace, folded her arms, and shrugged. "And that's the whole story," she said.

Samra, sitting in one of the armchairs, blew her nose loudly. "Tragic!" she said, pretending to dab tears away from her eyes. "Such a sad story. I feel sad hearing it, and you feel sad telling it, don't you?" Samra glanced up at Agnis and sniffed. "Oh, no, Ogma. Look at her! The stupid girl is actually crying."

It was true. Agnis stood in the middle of the room, tears streaming down her face, her shoulders shaking. She didn't seem to notice K'nock, her faithful companion, who stood beside her, nuzzling her hand with a worried expression. In fact, she was so distraught that she didn't even bother wiping her face. She just looked at the floor and sobbed quietly.

What upset Agnis the most wasn't that she hadn't known what Ramua had gone through. It was that she hadn't tried, not even once, to imagine what Ramua's youth had felt like, or what it had been like for her to marry Palea at such a young age and become the queen of Fiana. It had never occurred to her that this cold, regal woman had once been young, or had dreams, or known love, or felt the pain of a broken heart.

Agnis could well imagine that having another woman steal your husband's heart would not be easy—not to mention having that woman bear your husband a child that he loved more than your own. But Palea was no ordinary man: he was the king. Kings took mistresses all the time. In fact, Agnis knew of some kings who had dozens of wives and scores of children, legitimate and illegitimate.

In comparison, Palea had only two women in his life: his wife and his mistress, and Agnis had never heard a word in her

life to suggest that this was anything out of the ordinary. In fact, she had even taken pride in Palea's preference for her mother. She heard the stories about how her father had brightened when Rubis came into his life, and she delighted in them.

But she had never tried to see it from the other side. She wasn't friendly with Ramua's children. She had thought, sometimes, that it would have been nice to get along with them better, but she accepted things as they were.

Agnis had gone through her life quite happily, never realizing, until now, how much Ramua and her children must have resented her and her mother, resented the love that Palea showered on them, resented the easy affection that Rubis and Agnis took for granted but which they had always been denied.

What hateful creatures we must be to Ramua! Agnis thought, and she was both shocked and embarrassed that it had never occurred to her before. *We ruined her life.*

That was sad in and of itself, but realizing that she had never considered the depth of despair Ramua had endured for so long, that her own thoughtlessness had actually made a bad situation worse—that was what really saddened her. So she stood there and let the tears come, weeping for Ramua and her children, for herself and her mother, for her father, for all the stupid misunderstandings that arise in the world simply because people got so caught up with their own problems, or even their own happiness, that they forgot other people even exist.

"Agnis . . ." Duan called out to her, worried. Check, blinking his big black eyes sympathetically, flew over and landed on Agnis' shoulder, trying to offer his support. This seemed to rouse her a little, and she roughly wiped her tears away with both hands.

"Right," she said quietly. "I understand. I now know what I didn't know before. I'll return to Fiana as fast as I can, and I will refuse any right to the throne. I don't think Ramua will forgive us just for that, of course, but it will be a start. Maybe my mother and I will go away . . . Yes, that's it, we'll leave the summer palace and find ourselves a small house somewhere. My mother will understand, and my father . . . Well, he'll be lonely at first, but he's a rational man. He'll see the wisdom of it. I wish Ramua had spoken to us about all this before, so we could discuss it. I wish I'd been more sensitive to what she'd gone through. But it's not too late. We can still work things out. I'm sure that if we talk this through together, we can do it." She raised her eyes to the witches and spoke clearly and calmly. "It's what we should have done a long time ago."

There was silence for a moment as the witches, genuinely touched, stared at Agnis in bewilderment.

Ogma was the first to speak. "I'm glad you understand things better now. It means it was worth telling you the story."

"Yes," said Samra. "We always try to help, but it's rare that someone actually listens to what we have to say!"

"So go back to Fiana and do what you have to do."

"We won't stop you. You can leave freely—all of you."

"And we aren't always this nice, are we, Samra?"

"Oh, no." Samra shook her head vehemently. "Almost never."

Agnis looked straight at the witches. "Thank you," she said evenly. "But I can't possibly leave until you tell me how to lift the curse on my mother."

The witches looked at each other, then back at Agnis.

"Pardon?" queried Ogma, raising a purple eyebrow. "Until we do what?"

"Tell me how to lift the curse on my mother," Agnis repeated slowly.

The witches burst into laughter.

"Silly girl, who said anything about lifting your mother's curse?" Ogma looked at her crossly. "That's not part of the deal, so get out of here and be happy we let you leave with your lives. You've wasted enough of our energy with your foolishness already."

"Yeah, it takes power to keep this up, you know." Samra, annoyed, gestured to her own smoky pink figure, then to Ogma's purple one.

"I'm not leaving until you tell me," Agnis said in a clear, unfaltering voice.

Ogma shrugged. "It's your funeral," she said.

"Maybe it'll be yours," Agnis said, clenching her fists around her staff.

Samra evidently found Agnis' threat amusing. "Ha ha ha! You'll kill us? Oh, that's rich! That's a good one, isn't it, Ogma?"

Ogma started giggling. "We'd have the last laugh, all right. Because if we're dead, who's going to lift the curse? Nobody, that's who! And Rubis will spend the rest of her life eating birdseed!"

"Yes, wouldn't that be awful?"

As the witches screamed with laughter at the thought of her dilemma, Agnis said nothing, but her face turned as red as a beet. She had taken the witches' abuse patiently up until now, but she'd reached her limit. Really, it was a miracle she'd lasted this long, considering her usual temper. But finally she stepped forward, fuming.

"Then fight me," she shouted. "Come on, come out and fight! Stop hiding behind this smoke, you cowards!" She

ran toward the floating bodies, swinging her staff, but the witches vanished before she could strike. The smoke dissipated suddenly, then reappeared across the room. K'nock, trying to provide some reinforcement, chased after the swirling, hazy figures, pouncing and snapping at them with his huge jaws. Even Check joined in, trying to help K'nock by crying out the locations as the witches began to materialize again, but it was no use. The vapor would disperse and coalesce, disperse and coalesce, and the mocking laughter of the witches rang in their ears.

"Cowards!" Agnis shouted, falling to her knees in frustration. "Cowards!" She was determined not to cry, but her voice started to break.

"Oh, Agnis . . ." Duan was unable to stand by any longer; he rushed toward Agnis and embraced her. "Don't listen to them, Agnis. I promise you, we'll defeat these guys, and we'll turn your mother back!"

"Stop it!" Agnis pushed his hands away. "Don't. Don't be nice to me. Not now. I can't . . . I'm not going to cry . . ."

But her lip started to tremble, no matter how she tried to steel herself. Duan's heart went out to her; he tried to embrace her again. "Agnis . . ."

"Leave me alone!"

"Well, well! What a touching scene." Samra materialized in the air next to them, smirking. Ogma appeared too, looking disgusted.

"Oh, Duan. *Honey*." Ogma wrinkled her nose. "Taken in by *that* act? I can't believe you've got eyes for a brat like her." She sighed. "Oh well, I suppose you're just a kid yourself, with no idea of what a *real* woman can do for you."

"Yeah, you have to be a real man to understand our worth." Smiling, Samra drifted through the air toward Olba,

who had hung back silently, leaned against the door with his arms crossed. She started to trace the outlines of his biceps with her vaporous pink fingers. "Right, handsome?"

"True, true. Those rugged good looks—here's a real man, right here!" Ogma materialized in the air next to Olba and began stroking his face. "Be still my beating heart!"

Olba threw up his arms, dispersing the smoky figures on either side of him, and opened his mouth for the first time.

"Pah!" he snorted. "You call yourselves *real* women? You're about as fake as it gets—as fake as those monsters you kept sending after us. The only reason you look so good is because you've been sucking the life force out of other people. You're nothing but a couple of parasites!"

The two hovering figures froze in midair as the fighter continued. "How old are you, really? Two hundred? Three hundred? Do you even remember? You're pathetic!"

The witches said nothing. The seductive expressions on their pretty, pouty young faces vanished, replaced by a look of the fiercest, purest, most fearsome hatred imaginable. Then the two smoky figures shivered and disappeared.

"You've really angered us now." Ogma's voice thundered down from the ceiling, reverberating through the room. "Step outside and we'll settle this once and for all."

"Yeah, we'll give you a showdown all right!" came Samra's voice. "You asked for it; you got it!"

"Bring it on!" Olba shouted at the ceiling, looking around at the others. "But just to keep it interesting, let's make a little wager—unless you're scared."

"Scared? Of you?" Ogma's voice boomed down contemptuously, followed by Samra's: "Don't make us laugh."

"Fine," said Olba. "If we win, you promise to turn Agnis' mother back."

“And if you lose?”

“Then . . . then you can curse us however you like, or do whatever you want with us! Well? Do we have a deal?”

There was a moment of silence. Duan, Agnis, and Olba looked at one another in anticipation.

Then Ogma’s voice returned. “Fine. We can agree to that. It’s a meaningless promise anyway.”

“Yeah.” Samra’s shrill laughter echoed all around them. “Because you haven’t got a chance in hell to beat us!”

CHAPTER 24:

THE FABRIC OF THE UNIVERSE



“So, Ogma dear, what are we going to use?” demanded Samra, standing behind her sister with her hands on her hips. “A chimera? A manticore, perhaps? Oh, I know! What about a dragon?”

Ogma did not reply. She was rooting angrily through her wardrobe, flinging purple clothes and lacy underthings about with abandon. *Our mistake was to go easy on them because of those two good-looking boys!* she thought to herself. *We should have just gotten right down to business! When will we ever learn?*

But she would make up for that now. At last she had found what she was looking for: a big wicker trunk filled with wooden dolls of all shapes and sizes.

“Hurry up, Ogma,” said Samra, pulling a pair of purple pantyhose off her head. “If we don’t strike fast, they’ll start saying those mean things again, and I couldn’t bear that. I couldn’t bear it, I tell you!”

"Don't worry, Samra," said Ogma, dragging the wicker trunk out of the wardrobe. "When I'm through with them, they won't say anything mean about us ever again—or about anyone else either!"

"Oooh, so many to choose from!" cried Samra in delight. "Which one are we going to use?" she repeated.

Ogma dumped the contents of the trunk onto the floor. "We're going to use them all!"

Looking at the huge heap of dolls, even Samra was taken aback. "Um, *all* of them? Really? What kind of monster will we get?"

"I have no idea," said Ogma with a shrug. "But I do know one thing—it'll be incredibly powerful; powerful enough to bend the fabric of the universe!"

Though Samra was impressed with her sister's ambition and fervor, she also couldn't help worrying a bit. "*Bend* it? Ogma, dear, using this much magic won't just bend the fabric of the universe, it'll rip it to shreds!"

"So what? We're witches, aren't we? We'll just make a new one!"

"A new universe? Ha ha ha! Why not? I was getting bored with this one anyway! What do you think—should we make it pink or purple? Ha ha ha!"

"Samra, be serious!" Ogma chided. "I can't do this alone. I need your help!"

Samra stopped laughing the moment she heard the word *serious* come out of her sister's mouth. It was a word that neither of the witches used very often. In fact, Samra couldn't recall ever hearing Ogma utter it at all.

Peering closely at Ogma's face, Samra noticed something strange: a jagged line running across her sister's usually smooth forehead. It was like a crack marring the surface of a

perfect porcelain bowl. Her heart thumped against her chest. "O-Ogma," she stuttered, "what ha-happened to your f-forehead?"

"My forehead? What's the matter with you?" Ogma, impatient to begin ripping the fabric of the universe, wiped an angry hand across her forehead. As she did so, her white skin started to flake away like plaster crumbling from a wall.

Samra shrieked in horror and shock.

Ogma still hadn't noticed what was happening to her. She was too furious to do anything but glare at Samra. "What is wrong with you? Stop fooling around! Come on! Let's get started! Even I'm not used to doing spells like this. It's going to take everything we've got, Samra, and then some! We've already expended quite a bit of magical energy today, so we'll need to concentrate especially hard!"

"Th-that must be it, Ogma," Samra breathed softly.

"What?"

"Don't you see? We were fooling around too much! Caught up in the excitement, we used up too much magical power!"

"What are you driving at?" Ogma demanded. Her skin had continued to flake away all this time, and now most of her face was a mass of fissures and cracks; only the area around her left eye and her mouth was still normal. The skin on her throat and her hands was moldering, too.

Samra looked down at her own arms and screamed. Her skin was as badly cracked as Ogma's—maybe even worse. And through the cracks, she could see her own dried-out flesh, black as a mummy's, hanging loosely to her bones. She screamed again, tearing at her long, curly pink hair, which came out in clumps.

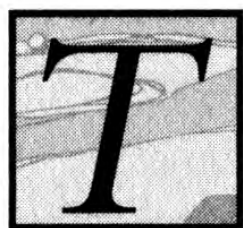
"Honestly, Samra," said Ogma in a severe tone, "this is no time to go all to pieces!"

“You . . . you . . . *idiot!*” screeched Samra. “Take a good look at yourself, Ogma! Go on, look!”

Trembling, for she had finally begun to realize that something was wrong, though still uncertain of what it might be, Ogma pulled her purple hand mirror from the folds of her robe and brought it hesitantly to her face.

CHAPTER 25:

THE GOLDEN PECKLACE



he witches were running late, while the adventurers were at the ready, prepared for the battle of a lifetime. However, as more and more time passed without the witches making an appearance or sending a magical monster against them, the crew began to let their guard down, and even, relax.

By now they were downright bored. The sun had set and the only light there was came through the windows of the mansion. And from a small campfire Olba had lit using kindling from the surrounding forest.

“What the heck is taking them so long?” Duan asked for what seemed like the hundredth time as he paced in front of the fire.

Olba sat on the front steps of the mansion, sipping from his hip flask. “You know women!” he snorted. “Probably fixing their hair in front of the mirror and trying on different tons of clothes.”

Normally such a chauvinistic statement would have elicited a blistering response from Agnis. And in fact, Olba had uttered it purposefully to rouse the girl from her funk. But it didn't work. Once it became clear the witches weren't going to show up right away, Agnis had sunk into a deep gloom. She sat beside K'nock, well away from Olba and Duan, obviously not paying attention to anything they said.

Olba sighed and swallowed from his flask again. "Hey, Duan—I'm starving!"

Duan shrugged. "I can't whip us up anything right now, Olba."

"I know. Just pass me my pack, will you? I've got some dried meat in the side pocket."

"Oh. Okay."

Olba took the pack from him and pulled out a strip of the meat. "Want some?"

Duan looked at Olba as though the fighter were crazy. "How can you eat at a time like this?" He felt that if he ate even one little bite, he'd be sick.

"A fighter's got to keep his strength up. You learn to eat when you can, not just when you're hungry."

"Giii!" Check flapped down to the step beside Olba and looked at him pleadingly.

Olba laughed. "Look, kid—even this grinia of yours knows it's smart to eat before a battle! He's got a fighter's heart." Olba tore off a small portion of the meat. "Here you go, little guy."

But Check turned up his nose at the offering. "Want drink!"

"What, you want some of this?" Olba raised his flask.

"Chaa! Check! Drink! Drink! Giis." The grinia nodded enthusiastically.

Olba burst out laughing. "He's got a fighter's heart, all right! Hey, Duan, I'm gonna give Check a little booze, is that okay?"

Duan, who had been watching with a smile, shook his head. "You'd better not, Olba. He gets drunk too easily. We shouldn't be encouraging him."

"A drunk grinia. Man, that's something I gotta see. Tell you what, Check," he said with a wink, "once we've finished with these witches, you, me, and my flask here will have us a little celebration. What do you say? Can you wait a little while longer?"

"Giii-aa! Check wait!"

Silence.

More silence.

"Arrrgh! I'm sick of waiting!" Olba cried out finally, shoving his flask into his pack and jumping to his feet.

"So am I," said Duan. "But what can we do?"

"I don't know, but anything is better than sitting around out here. I'm going back inside. One way or another, this is ending now." Without another word, Olba drew his sword and stalked back into the mansion.

"Wait for me!" said Duan, hurrying after him.

The grinia was right behind him. "Check come too!"

"Hey, don't leave me out here all alone!" Agnis called. "C'mon, K'nock!"

And so it was that the adventurers all entered the mansion again.

Once they were in the entrance hall, Olba threw back his head and shouted at the top of his voice: "Hey! Sogma and Omra, or whatever the heck you call yourselves! Did you forget about us? Or maybe you're just afraid to face us! Is that it? Are you a couple of damn chickens?"

Suddenly, a golden necklace dropped out of nowhere and landed on the floor between them. It sparkled in the light, clearly worth a small fortune. Agnis reached toward it.

"No!" cried Olba. "It might be a trick!"

But even as Agnis pulled her hand back, a voice said, "Take it. Take it and leave. Never come back here again!"

The voice seemed to come from the ceiling. It was a creaky voice, hoarse and cracked, and half-whining.

"Who said that?" demanded Olba, glancing around wildly.

"Go!" said the voice, hardly more than a whisper now, the sort of voice that might come from the mouth of a wizened old lady.

"Was that . . . one of the witches, you think?" Duan wondered aloud.

Olba shrugged. "I don't know, kid. They didn't sound like that before."

"You know what I think?" said Duan after a moment. "That necklace isn't a trap. It's a bribe! The witches don't want to fight us anymore. They just want us to go away!"

"But just a little while ago they were eager to fight," said Agnis. "What could have happened?"

"Maybe they used up too much of their magic and turned into the hags they really are!" Duan said. "Think about it! The only reason they look young is because they suck the lifeblood out of people and use it to rejuvenate themselves. You said so yourself, Olba, remember?"

"You might be on to something there, kid," Olba said thoughtfully.

"I know I am," said Duan. "Think of all the magic spells they've cast against us since we got here—no, since even *before* we got here! They burned themselves out and didn't even

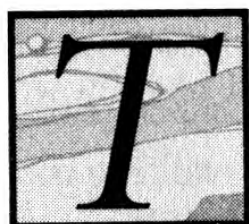
notice until it was too late! Now they're probably too old and weak to fight us. I'd give anything to see them right now!"

"B-but if that's true," gasped Agnis, giving Duan an anguished look, "how will they left the curse on my mother?"

Try as he might, Duan couldn't think of an answer to her question.

CHAPTER 26:

SISTERLY LOVE



he years that Ogma had magically kept at bay for so long caught up to her in mere moments. Now she was a decrepit crone, looking a more dead than alive and unable to stand on her own. She could barely even raise her head, from which a few paltry tufts of purple hair still sprouted.

“Samra,” she wheezed weakly, “I hope you aren’t scheming to use *it* all by yourself!”

It, as both sisters knew, was the precious store of lifeblood they had stolen from countless humans over the centuries of their magically prolonged lives. They kept a stash nearby for just such emergencies as this. It alone had the power to make them young again.

“Of course not, Ogma, dear,” croaked the all-but-toothless Samra in a hideous parody of reassurance. “How could you think such a thing?”

What little of Samra's skin hadn't flaked off had dried up completely, giving her the desiccated look of a mummy. Her bloodshot eyes had sunk so far into her skull that it was a wonder she could see at all. But unlike her sister, she was still able to walk, and leaning heavily on her witch's staff, she tottered across the room toward the closet where the lifeblood was kept. "You just sit there, Ogma, and rest your tired old bones," she said. "I'll get the lifeblood for us to share."

You won't trick me that easily, sister, thought Ogma, knowing very well that if Samra got to the lifeblood first, she would take it all for herself. After all, that was just what Ogma would do. "I'll come too, dearest sister," she said now in a thin, wavering voice. "I don't want you to strain yourself!"

She staggered to her feet and began to lurch like a zombie from one piece of furniture to another across the room, barely catching herself before she fell to the floor.

Seeing this, Samra panicked and began walking at full speed—which was hardly any faster than she had been walking to begin with. But it was still faster than Ogma could manage.

"You little worm!" Ogma screeched and hurled herself forward. Unfortunately, she misjudged the next piece of furniture—a table—and bounced off it, falling to the floor. Without missing a beat, she began to crawl after Samra. "You can run, but you can't hide!"

Samra glanced over her shoulder and saw that Ogma was almost caught up. She made better time on the floor, actually. "You're the worm," she spat back. "Look who's crawling! Ha ha h—urk . . ." Her mocking laughter turned into a fit of coughing. But she labored on.

Still Ogma crawled after her.

It was like a race between an asthmatic turtle and a snail. The only sound was the two of them panting for breath.

Suddenly, a voice rang out through the floorboards. It was that annoying girl again, shouting at them from the entrance hall below. "Tell me how to lift my mother's curse!" the voice demanded.

"Aaaah!" Startled by the interruption, Samra tripped and fell to the floor, losing her grip on her staff. Before she could get up, Ogma grabbed her feet.

"Got you now!"

The sisters began to bite, scratch, and kick each other, rolling across the floor.

"Aah! Ogma, stop!"

"Shut up, you bitch!"

"What did you call me?"

"It rhymes with witch."

"You vulgar old crone! Why did I have to get you for a twin sister?"

"Why, you ungrateful whelp! I always put you first!"

"Do not!"

"Do too! On our birthday, I give you the biggest piece of cake and take the smallest for myself. And this is the thanks I get?"

"Liar! You always take the biggest piece!"

In the midst of this squabbling, Agnis' voice rang out again. "Didn't you hear me? Tell me how to lift the curse, I'm warning you! Don't make me come up there!"

"Shut up!" the twin sisters screamed in unison. At last they had found something to agree on.

"It's your fault we've turned into . . . old hags," screeched Ogma.

"Our perfect skin, our perfect hair, all gone," wept Samra. "It's too sad for words!"

"There, there," said Ogma, trying to comfort her. "We shouldn't be fighting each other, dear sister."

“Yes, you’re right, Ogma, darling!”

The sisters opened their arms to embrace each other, but at the last second, Ogma elbowed Samra in the ribs. “Ha! Now who’s the worm!” And she crawled past her sister, heading for the closet with the lifeblood.

Samra was right behind her.

It cost Ogma precious seconds to get the door open, but once she did, she grabbed the bottle, pulling feebly at the cork.

“Wh-what are you doing?” cried Samra, who had caught up at last. “Give me that!”

The sisters pulled the bottle back and forth, neither one able to wrench it away from the other.

“It’s mine!”

“No, mine!”

It was at this point that Agnis’ voice intruded for the third time. “That does it! I’m coming up there with my Fire spell. Let’s see if you can survive that!”

The witches stopped fighting for possession of the bottle, though each of them kept her grip on it.

“We couldn’t survive it,” Samra whispered. “Not now.”

“I know,” said Ogma. “How annoying! I knew that girl was trouble right from the start!” She heaved a sigh. “You’d better tell her what she wants to know.”

“You tell her!”

For a second, it looked as though the witches might start fighting again. But then Ogma sighed more deeply than ever and shouted down to Agnis: “It’s the necklace, stupid! The golden necklace! Why do you think we gave it to you? Put it around the bird, and it will change your mother back!”

“Now leave us alone,” cried Samra. Keeping one hand on the bottle, she grabbed a necklace of multicolored beads

from around her neck and dashed it angrily to the floor. Even though she was too weak to cast another spell of her own, she still had various enchanted items at her disposal . . . and this was one of them.

“Be gone!” she shouted as the necklace broke, scattering loose beads across the floor.

CHAPTER 27:

THE FIRST RULE OF ADVENTURING



rattling sound, like hailstones pelting a roof, erupted.

“Uh-oh,” said Olba, glancing at Agnis, who stood there in the entrance hall, the golden necklace in her hand, “I think you might have—”

But he didn’t get the chance to finish whatever he was saying. In the next second, the mansion began to shake all around them. The floor tossed like the deck of a ship, and the adventurers stumbled, trying to keep their balance and head for the door.

“Danger! Danger!” Check flew in little circles above Duan’s head.

“We know, Check, we know!” screamed Duan and Olba simultaneously.

Agnis had grabbed hold of K’nock, who tried to lead her to safety outside the mansion. But even the big snow leopard

found it difficult to keep his balance as the mansion pitched under his paws.

Suddenly, there was a sharp cracking sound, as if the foundations of the house had split open. The air pressure increased so dramatically that Duan like he'd been slapped in the head by a giant. The others felt it too, the sensation of some immense force pressing against them. Spots danced before their eyes, and they fought to remain conscious.

Then, out of nowhere, something caught them up, spun them around, and sent them flying through . . . well, it was hard to say *what* they were flying through, only it wasn't the entrance hall of the witches' mansion. They seemed to be traversing bubbles or spheres of different colors, all the colors of the rainbow and then some, flashing from one to the next in the blink of an eye, swept along by a wind that was screaming even louder than they were.

It ended as suddenly as it had begun. With a heavy thud, the adventurers fell to the ground. Just seconds ago, they had been in the witches' mansion, at the center of the forest. Now they were . . . someplace else. By the light of the moon overhead, they saw that they landed at the center of a crossroads.

"Owww. Where the heck are we?" asked Olba, sitting up and rubbing his back. "And how come it's night all of a sudden?"

"I don't know," said Duan as he climbed to his feet, "but wherever we are, it's got to be better than where we were!"

"You were right, Duan." Agnis used her staff to pick herself up, then brushed the dust from her mantle. K'nock, stretched out beside her, licked the fur on his paws. "About the witches. They must've used up all their magic and turned into hideous old hags! That's why they panicked and sent us away like that. They knew they couldn't beat us in a fair fight!"

“Giii-a!” chirped Check in agreement as he flew to Duan’s shoulder.

Duan laughed. “I wish I could have seen their wrinkly old faces!”

“Huh. I’ll bet that’s why they got rid of us,” Olba commented. “As vain as those two were, they would’ve sooner died than let anybody see them in that condition.”

“I’m actually kind of disappointed,” Duan said. “I was looking forward to a big fight there at the end!”

Olba shrugged. “So was I. But the first rule of adventuring is to expect the unexpected.”

“Anyway,” Duan said, “everything worked out for the best.” He turned to Agnis. “You’ll be able to lift your mother’s curse now, Agnis. Um, you *do* still have the necklace, don’t you?”

“Of course, silly. See?” She held out her slender wrist, the skin as smooth and pale as silver. The necklace was wrapped tightly around it, glittering in the moonlight.

“Wow, how beautiful!” said Duan. Then, blushing fiercely: “I-I mean the necklace!”

Agnis only smiled and said, “I know exactly what you mean . . . *Duan*.”

Had she ever called him by his name before? Duan couldn’t remember. But he was sure of one thing: she’d never uttered it with the tenderness and affection he now heard in her voice.

Or had he just imagined it? He was completely flustered. “So, um, I guess you’ll be wanting to get back to Fiana?”

He groaned inwardly at these words. *Idiot! She’s going to think you’re eager for her to leave! Why is it so hard to talk to girls?*

But Agnis didn’t seem to notice anything strange. “I guess so,” she said, then reached out and took hold of Duan’s hand. He felt like his heart had stopped beating.

"Duan, thank you so much for helping me," she said, looking him in the eyes. "Thank you from the bottom of my heart."

"B-but I didn't do anything," he protested, embarrassed. "Not really. All I wanted was to go on an adventure!"

"I'm sorry you never leveled up," she said. "I'd give you all my points if I could. You're a brave man and a good friend."

And then she leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek!

"Um . . . ah . . . urk . . ." He smiled, dazed.

"Miss girl!" piped the baby grinia from Duan's shoulder. "Miss cat too!"

"Awww . . ." Agnis planted a kiss on top of Check's tiny head. The grinia tumbled off Duan's shoulder, fluttering to the ground.

"Hey, what about me?" said Olba with a smirk. "Don't you owe me a little something?"

Agnis turned to him and sighed. "Look, I'm sorry I can't pay you what I promised, Olba. I can't give you half the treasure."

He waved a dismissive hand. "Aw, it's only money. Anyway, that's not what I meant. Sheesh, what's a guy gotta do to get a kiss around here?"

Laughing, Agnis walked up to the big fighter, stood on tiptoes, and kissed him on the cheek.

"*That's* what I'm talking about," said Olba.

"Thanks, Olba. I couldn't have found out how to save my mother without you."

She beamed at him.

"No sweat, sweetheart. But that reminds me." Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out the flaming red ring she had

given him. "You can take this back if you want. I know it belonged to your mother."

Agnis shook her head. "Keep it. I'm sure she'd want you to have it, just as I do."

"Okay, then. I'll accept it gratefully." He slipped the ring onto his finger—or tried to. But his fingers were too large. Even his pinky was too big. Finally he just tucked it back into his pocket with a rueful grin.

Agnis started to walk over to K'nock. The snow leopard came to his feet at her approach.

"We'll take you to Fiana," said Duan. "Won't we, Olba?"

"You're darn right we will," said the fighter.

"You guys are sweet," said Agnis, "but this is something I have to do alone." She jumped onto K'nock's back. "I'm not afraid of Queen Ramua any more. And I'm going to make her understand that she doesn't have any reason to be afraid of me . . . or my mother."

"B-but . . . how do you know the way back to Fiana from here?" Duan asked.

With a laugh, Agnis gestured skyward with her staff. "The stars are a map, if you know how to read them."

"Wow," breathed Duan.

"Bye, Duan! Bye, Olba! Bye, Check! Thanks again for everything! If you're ever in Fiana, make sure to visit!"

And with that, K'nock bounded off down the highway, carrying Agnis to her destiny.

Duan, Olba, and Check watched them go, feeling dazed by the sudden turn of events. Everything had happened so fast, it all seemed a little unreal.

"Wow," Duan repeated. "She's so . . . proactive. D'you think she'll be okay, Olba? She left her trunk back at the mansion and she probably doesn't have much money."

"Ah, she'll be fine, kid," said Olba with a shrug. "With that Fire spell of hers, I'm more worried about anybody who runs into her! Besides, she's got K'nock with her."

"I guess so . . ."

Olba glanced sharply at Duan, then smiled knowingly. "You've fallen for her, haven't you, kid? Admit it!"

"What?" Duan felt as if all the blood in his body were suddenly flowing the wrong way. "N-n-n-no! Of course not! What is it with you adults? Is that all you ever think about?"

"Ha ha ha! You protest too much, methinks!"

"Yeah, well what about you? You seemed rather fond of her yourself." He mimicked: "'What's a guy gotta do to get a kiss around here?'"

"Hrrmph." Olba turned as red as the ring Agnis had given him. He abruptly changed the subject. "Y'know, it's funny. We went into the forest to steal the witches' treasure, and they wound up with ours."

"What do you mean?"

"It wasn't only Agnis' trunk that got left behind. All I've got left is what I'm carrying in my pack."

"That's all I started out with," said Duan. "I guess I came out even. And don't forget, you leveled up!"

"I'm not complaining," said Olba. "It's just kind of funny, that's all."

"Do you think the witches are going to make themselves young again somehow?"

"I wouldn't be surprised. But if I ever hear that they're up to their old tricks, I'll go back and finish what we started. Right, can't hang around here forever. Better get moving." He adjusted his backpack and considered the possibilities.

Duan was busy thinking too. *What about me?* he wondered. *What should I do? A high-level fighter like Olba doesn't need a kid like*

me tagging along. He only took me on for this one quest and now it's over. I guess I'm on my own again. Well, I've got Check, so that's something.

Maybe I can go looking for Gaeley again. Yeah, that's what I'll do. If Agnis can travel by herself, so can I. I'm never going to be a proper fighter unless I learn how to fend for myself!

"C'mon, Duan," said Olba, who had come to decision of his own. "If you don't hurry, we'll have to camp out. But if we start walking, I reckon we'll come to a small village soon."

At this, Duan's determination to go on alone vanished. "Y-you mean you *want* me to come along with you?"

Olba grinned. "Why not? This backpack of mine is awfully heavy. I can always use someone to carry it!"

Duan's happiness evaporated in an instant. "That's all I am to you, isn't it, Olba? Someone to carry your bag. Why don't you just buy a mule?"

Olba erupted into laughter. "Ha ha ha! Can't you take a joke, kid? You gotta lighten up! You did pretty good on that last quest. Showed a lot of promise, even if you didn't earn any experience points. You'll do better on our next quest."

"Our next quest?" Duan echoed wonderingly.

"Sure." Olba had pulled out a map, which he now showed to Duan by the light of the moon. "Agnis isn't the only one who knows how to read the stars." He pointed to a crossroads on the map. "We're here, see? Just south is a big town called Kovenia. We'll make our way there and sell the ring that Agnis gave me. That ought to bring us enough guilders to outfit ourselves in style: weapons, armor, the works. By the time I'm through with you, Duan, you're gonna look like a real adventurer, not some deserter from the army!"

"Hey, I never deserted the army," Duan said. "The army deserted me!"

“That’s the spirit,” said Olba, slapping him on the back and dislodging Check from Duan’s shoulder.

“Giii!” Annoyed, the grinia fluttered in the air between them.

“What about you, little guy?” Olba asked. “Are you with us?”

“Check come! Help friends!”

Duan was feeling a strange mix of emotions. He missed Agnis and K’nock already, but at the same time he was ecstatic at the thought of what he could learn from Olba.

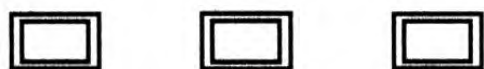
“C’mon guys,” said Olba, setting out along the road. “Kovenia awaits!”

“Kovenia,” mused Duan as he fell in beside him. “I wonder if I’ll find some news of my brother there?”

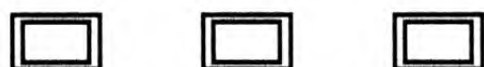
“Who knows?” said Olba. “The first rule of adventuring is to always—”

“I know, I know,” interrupted Duan. “Expect the—”

“Unexpected!” squawked Check. “Chaa!”



Duan’s adventures continue in *Two-Headed Wizard*,
the second installment of the four-volume series:
The Adventures of Duan Surk.



BONEHEAD:



A repulsive monster conjured by black magic. This doglike creature is over five feet tall, and the length of its black-furred body, from its hollow-skulled head to the tip of its tail, is nearly twice that. It has flames for eyes, jagged golden fangs, and a long blood-red tongue. Boneheads possess superhuman strength and stamina; they're almost impossible to kill. Strike one down, and its fangs transform into new boneheads. The best strategy is to not encounter them in the first place. But if you do, burn them with fire magic, use holy magic, or simply run like hell.

CYCLOPS:



A one-eyed giant found in both long- and short-eared varieties. It has a robust body, often as large as a hill, and a small horn protruding from its head. Its freakish strength can split boulders, and it never tires. Use its lack of brains to gain an advantage in battle. It has one weakness: its single eye, which, despite its large size, does not see very well. However, cyclopeses have an acute sense of smell. The best way to kill one is to stab its eye. But instead of such heroics, we recommend you run away so you don't get clubbed to death.

GREEN SLIME:



The most common of all slimes. Named for its translucent green color, it is mostly harmless. However, the larger varieties can cause bothersome blockages. If you are a beginner, they are useful for earning experience points, so feel free to battle any you see. Both standard attacks and magic attacks are effective against them.

GRIFFIN:



It has the head and wings of an eagle and the body of a lion. It is famed for its pride and valor. It has a sharp beak and claws and immense strength. It can fly, giving it an additional advantage. It's unlikely you'll ever encounter one, but if you do, you are advised to flee.

GRINIA:



A winged lizard approximately six inches long, with large black eyes. Although wild grinnias live deep in the forest to avoid human contact, they can make excellent pets. They understand human speech and can talk a little too. Grinnias can use low-level defensive magic, heal small wounds, treat conditions such as poisoning and paralysis, and help recover strength. Passive by nature and highly curious, grinnias have no offensive powers and rely on their wings to escape danger. However, their teeth and claws are not to be taken lightly.

HYDRA:



A huge snakelike monster with nine heads. The hydra is said to be over thirty-two feet tall, and it has several short feet that carry its gigantic body along the ground. According to legend, some spit poison and others breathe fire. If you cut off one head, supposedly two grow in its place. It is recommended that you seal the wound with fire, but the success of this strategy is, of course, uncorroborated.

MINOTAUR:



A terrifying beast with the head of a bull. There are many half-beasts in legends, but this one is probably the most famous. Occasionally one lurks in a dark dungeon. Its main weapons are its muscular frame and massive strength. Some say it can use spells such as Mania, but that is unproven. We also lack information about its vulnerabilities, but both standard and magic attacks are effective. One thing is certain—if you do end up fighting one, prepare for a long battle.

PECULESE:



A cute monster, approximately twelve inches tall, with long hair and one eye. It cries in a high-pitched voice and scuttles around quickly. Be careful lifting it or hugging it, as it has long sharp claws, and the likelihood of getting scratched is quite high. Because of their cute appearance, they are sometimes kept as pets, but being rare, they are quite expensive. If you see one, catch it! You could make a great profit. But don't kill it, as you won't get much for its poor-quality fur.

SNOW LEOPARD:



A creature famed for its magnificent white fur and ideal proportions. These big cats tend to live alone, deep in the mountains or in snow-covered forests. They use their sharp claws and fangs to attack, but because of their high level of intelligence, it is unwise to combat one with strength alone. They track movement in order to determine a course of action, which makes them highly efficient predators.